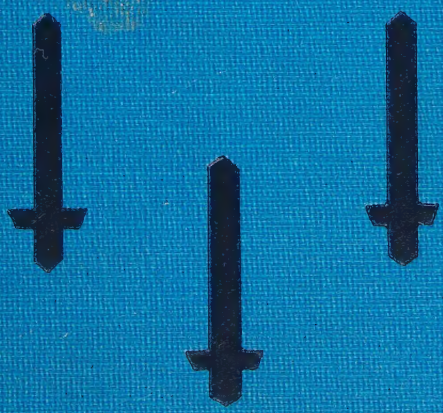
WOODEN SWORDS

JACQUES DEVAL



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/woodenswords0000unse_z7p5

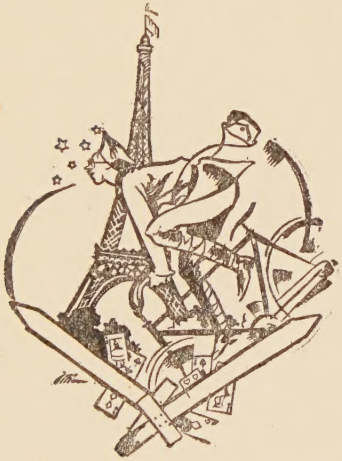
Wooden Swords

WOODEN SWORDS

by

JACQUES DEVAL

Translated by Lawrence S. Morris



NEW YORK

THE LITERARY GUILD OF AMERICA

1930

SABRES DE BOIS

COPYRIGHT, 1929, BY ALBIN MICHEL, PARIS

COPYRIGHT, 1930, BY THE VIKING PRESS, INC.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

TO

PIERRE BENOIT

GOOD nature is no crime, and this book is not a sacrilege. I am placing it not on the altars of the Fatherland, but on the graves of three comrades in the S. O. S., Jean Bouvier, Émile Chappuis, and Louis Legrand, killed by a shell fifty yards from where I stood. Wooden swords . . . toy pistols . . .

J. D.
S. O. S.
358th Infantry regiment, 71st division: clerk, bicyclist, and male nurse, at Vingré, Roucy, and Godewaerswelde.

Wooden Swords

". . . Or, tenez, vela ma salade,
Qui n'est froissée ne coupée;
Je vous la rens, et mon espée,
Et faictes prier Dieu pour moy."

—LE FRANC ARCHIER
DE BAIGNOLLET

Chapter 1

CONTRARY to the popular impression, a soldier in the Service of Supplies was not necessarily a misshapen weakling, nor even prematurely decrepit, nor wasted with consumption. He was simply a man who "had something." It is true that in rare cases it was a man who "had somebody." But this did not occur so often as people imagine. Examining boards were seldom endowed with the tenderness of which they were suspected, and were little inclined to repay the courtesy of a dinner with that of a diagnosis. Ordinarily, a soldier in the S. O. S. was neither an athlete with influential friends nor an invalid whose joints were already stiff with the approach of death; but somewhere within his breast, or perhaps his liver, or his spleen, he sheltered what the world has agreed to call an affection, no doubt because it is a source of suffering. . . . The strapping fellow who crushed your hand in fingers that could easily have torn a pack of cards in half may have concealed a hernial bandage under his vest. Another

man's leggings chastely covered the meshes of a pair of stockings for varicose veins. . . . Or a Herculean torso housed a generous but undisciplined heart.—Depressing secrets these were, to which one's wife was not always admitted; one's mistress never. And a reunion today in one of the branches of the S. O. S. is not a Court of Miracles, but a Court of Mysteries.

Yet there was one type of soldier doomed to limited service whose health was irreproachable. His cheeks glowed, his digestion was perfect, his heart action uninterrupted; his breathing was smooth, and his muscles in good tone; a solid chest, sturdy legs, and a firm grip. When he stepped forward, in his glorious nudity, before the Board, the colonel's face lighted up, the gendarme squared his shoulders, and the pale sub-prefect watered at the mouth with jealousy. The doctor poked his finger in the candidate's ribs, flexed each joint of his magnificent frame, and finished off with a ringing slap on the shoulder-blades. A little more, and he would have sent the recruit galloping around the green table. But, alas, at the moment when the *Dignus est* was about to be pronounced, the recruit would lean down from his majestic height and stammer a few words in the ear of this appraiser of human flesh. They were enough: the mirage dissipated; the Fatherland would not gain this defender.

For he was as short-sighted as an owl; into the S. O. S. with him!

For my own part, I have no pretensions either to beauty or strength; my appearance before the Board failed to dazzle the colonel; the sub-prefect continued to clean his nails of the grit that obscured their lustre; and if the doctor took an unprejudiced interest in me, it was no doubt because I gave him a chance to brush up on certain osteological details that had slipped his memory.

But I may claim to be short-sighted. Treacherous blurrings, unintentional rudenesses, and ridiculous blunders, have been my lot in life. I grope through a yielding world of hazy contours, vague surfaces, and capricious depths; a world built on shifting planes, slyly foreshortened and dimmed with fine mists, which cast a veil over the ambiguous faces of women that is more deceptive than the most skilful make-up. It has frequently been my fate to make those obnoxious jokes that are tolerable only in intimacy, to strangers I have mistaken for old comrades; and invariably I make cynical and adventurous approaches to some perfumed lady who is revealed, on closer view, as an old friend of the family.

Armed merely with the sleeve of my overcoat, or the iron tip of my umbrella, I constitute—so I am told—a

permanent menace to any moderate-sized apartment. I was probably the only well-brought-up child who was advised by his parents, from the day he first put on trousers with pockets, never to take his hands out of them except in case of necessity; for early in life my right hand had proved redoubtable and my left disastrous, with a record of coffee cups balanced carefully on imaginary corners of tables, varnish gouged off doors by my keys, and silk scarves tangled into Gordian knots. Yet to accomplish even these feats, I must have the aid of my glasses. Deprived of them, I sit down or lie down where I am, until somebody finds them again or brings me another pair; for I have long since been cured of trying to recover them myself, when I have dropped them, by the number and variety of unmentionable matters I have picked up, thinking that I was putting my hand upon them.

Under such circumstances, although admission to the S. O. S. may be the right of some and a wise precaution for their own sake, you will readily see that in limiting me to this service, the Board was merely fulfilling its duty, in the protection of others rather than myself.

I have often shuddered at the responsibility that would have fallen on some skeptical or absent-minded medical officer, by whose decision I might have been entrusted,

in time of war, with the panoply of murderous weapons that are put into the hands of real soldiers. I have pictured myself—one of those of whom the Bible has said, they have eyes and they see not—in the anxious shadows of an observation post: I am clutching a rifle, the distant tip of whose barrel I am not permitted to see. As the girdle about the waist of the pilgrims to Emmaus used to ring with the bumping of calabashes and gourds, my belt is heavy with hand-grenades, which clink as I shift my feet. Over my head the moon shimmers and plays a luminous gleam on the unlucky concavity of my glasses: an excellent mark for the enemy's observers. I see myself, in my solicitude for my duty, massacring our patrols, riddling our detachments sent out to mend the barbed wire, stirring up the artillery, and alarming the trenches for kilometers on each side by my desperate firing at the shadow of a turnip-top sticking up in No Man's Land. Or I picture an attack of Germans, *Feldwebel* at their head, entering our lines with no other greeting from me than, "Are you relieving me?" . . . Sower of death and disaster, I behold myself at last brought before a hastily convened court martial, charged with innumerable homicides and ignoble treacheries, shielding my blinking and criminal eyes with my fettered hands.

No, in its struggle for a just and great cause, France was deservedly spared the handicap of my dangerous

good-will. May the God of mercy protect all whom I love—and myself as well—from its blight!

It is not my intention to figure largely in these Memoirs: on the whole, rather than passing through great events and grave perils, I merely skirted their flank. If this book were a painting, I should appear in it like one of those discreet and tiny figures that artists place on the canvas, close to the frame, their only purpose, although they stand in the foreground, being to focus the eye and draw the fan of perspectives into a fixed point. If occasionally I step up to the centre of the picture, it will be merely that I have grown absent-minded, or that my short-sightedness has forced me to look more closely at the things of which I wish to speak.

On the eve of the war, I had already been a soldier for two years, and had made the pleasant calculation that only fifty days were left before the expiration of my service. Although I belonged, like everyone else in those days, to the 22nd Section of the C. O. A., I can truthfully say that I did not suffer greatly from that bondage, which was broken by long furloughs and convenient illnesses. On the thirty-first of July, having returned from Dieppe a few days before, I was at the infirmary,

perfecting the details of an illusory and mysterious malady whose convalescence would take me comfortably to the end of my service. The disease I had chosen involved such strange relations between organs usually independent of each other that it would have baffled the most learned civilian doctor, who I am sure could never have understood that shooting pains in the back might produce a buzzing in the ears, followed by a dry cough and indigestion. But a medical officer's diagnosis in such cases is infinitely quicker. The one who examined me had simply said:

"Pains in the back, eh? I see. . . . A sort of twitching, is that it?"

And, by way of prescription, he ordered me to make out an application, to be signed the next day, for a convalescent leave, to be generously proportioned to the acuteness of my disease.

That same evening, a telegraphic order restored me to health by suspending all furloughs; and the following morning I reported again for duty.

I was an orderly. At two o'clock the commandant sent for me. He was holding an envelope in one hand:

"Take this to the Commissariat on the Quai de la Rapée, at once."

And he added:

"These are marching orders, so don't waste any time along the way. The decree for general mobilization has just been issued."

Good God! It had come.

News of the decree had not yet reached the street. People were riding in street cars, gazing in shop windows, sitting in cafés—and all of these people had still a few hours of peace to enjoy. Ninety-five out of a hundred would have given odds that they were to go on enjoying it indefinitely. But I knew that for the past ten minutes they had been at war; I myself was at war. I merely shrugged my shoulders when the conductor asked for my five sous.

"We're mobilizing now, you know," I told him.

An old gentleman, who had overheard me, insisted:

"Are you quite sure?"

He polished his glasses carefully:

"Then I am getting off."

And at the next stop, nearly all of the passengers quietly got off; there was no pushing; each one was thinking of a package to be done up, a letter to be written, or a house to be set in order.

At the Commissariat I was admitted to the captain's office and proffered my envelope with a romantic gesture. But, with an eraser in one hand, he was engaged in

climbing arduously up and down the Babylonian flights of an enormous column of figures, and each time that I thrust the paper under his nose, trembling with the urgency of my errand, he grumbled:

". . . and carry seven. . . . Seven and five are twelve, and eight are twenty . . . I'll be with you in a moment . . . and six are twenty-six . . ."

At last he put down the eraser. Behind his long desk he looked like a little clerk in one of the city departments. He opened the envelope and pushed his cap on the back of his neck, caressing his bald skull gently and murmuring as if in prayer:

". . . and carry thirteen . . . and carry thirteen . . . and carry thirteen . . ."

He held the order out towards me:

"You know what's in it?"

"Yes, sir."

He heaved himself up from his arm-chair.

"Finish this addition for me. I have some orders to give. . . . Fifth column and carry thirteen."

He handed me the eraser as though it were an invaluable adding-machine that he was turning over to me.

With the best will in the world, I mounted in my turn to the assault of the terrible column. But beneath

my feet I heard the rumbling of carts, the whinnying of horses, and the cries of drivers. . . .

"So we're in for it . . . fifth column . . . there's a war on . . . and carry thirteen . . ."

As you may guess, I had not advanced a single figure when the captain returned; he took his seat and I made my report:

"Ninth column, Captain, and carry six."

After all, what risk did I run?

"Tell the commandant that the First Section has left and the Second is getting loaded."

Then, taking up the eraser once more, he quietly resumed his task:

". . . Ninth column . . . and carry six . . . and five are eleven . . ."

That evening I went for a stroll on the boulevard. The mobilization decree had been posted. Crowds flocked about every man in uniform, and stones hurtled through the plate-glass windows of suspected shops. Opposite the Crédit Lyonnais the mob was growling in front of a shop. There could be no doubt about its nationality: a little novelty shop, which had recently been opened, with statuettes, cups, ink wells, and opera glasses of unmistakable Berlin taste. But it was neither the window display,

nor the outrageously Prussian name over the door, which had exasperated the crowd: the unlucky proprietor, who had either not had time to flee, or had been reluctant to do so, had remained on the sidewalk before his showcase. And as if this were not enough, the poor devil happened to be a perfect example of the Teutonic type. Two sturdy policemen, one on either side of him, were waiting for the moment when they might spirit him away without his being lynched by the mob. At each stone that crashed through a pane in his window, the two guards drew aside with an encouraging smile; but the German, standing his ground bare-headed, replied with obsequious little bows, his fingers linked across his vest, and the tails of his coat fluttering. During the lulls, he stooped down to rescue an alarm clock or an ash tray, which he slipped furtively into his pocket. Once a piece of flagging caught him brutally on the shoulder, and tears ran down his cheeks into his beard; but a moment after, his hands clasped together, he made another little bow, as if to thank his assailant. The crowd took pity on him and allowed him to be led away.

At the Café de Madrid, there were as many people on top of the tables as on the chairs. Every few minutes a new orator plunged into the crowd, burrowed for ten

or twenty yards through the flood, and reappeared clinging to a coat rack or standing on his neighbor's shoulders:

"The English have landed two hundred thousand men!"

"Garros has attacked a Zeppelin and flown through it in his plane! In one side and out the other, three times in succession!"

"Berlin is in flames and the Kaiser has been shot!"

At each new bit of marvellous news the crowd howled with joy, wept, and applauded; then the coat rack broke or the shoulders separated, and the announcer tumbled to the floor amid the singing of the *Marseillaise.*

Outside the offices of the *Matin,* a dense column of men was advancing down the boulevard behind a leader in a silk hat, waving milk cans and cheese baskets on sticks for standards. From the crowded ranks rose a formidable cry:

"On to Maggi's!"

Eventually, I believe, this column arrived at the Avenue des Ternes, after smashing the shutters at the Maggi milk depot in the Faubourg Saint-Martin like so many drum heads.

A little man nudged my elbow:

"What are they yelling about?"

"They are yelling: On to Maggi's!"

My questioner flung his arms in the air:

"And that was supposed to be English! My God!"

His eyes hardened into a glint and he set off down the boulevard, bawling at the top of his voice:

"On to Magic! On to Magic!"

First one, then two, and then a handful of idlers fell in behind him. A mere corporal at the rue Drouot, by the time he had reached the Opera he was the colonel of a whole regiment, chanting behind him:

"On to Magic!"

They were embarked, no doubt with clear consciences, to set fire to the roller coasters at Magic City.

But fortunately for the Entente Cordiale, a squad of bicycle police intervened at the rue Royale, calmed the leader, and dispersed his troops.

Coming back towards the Opera, I was stunned by the silence that was falling, little by little, over the crowd. I climbed on a bench to find out what was causing it. A carriage was moving slowly down the boulevard escorted by men walking bare-headed. From time to time one of them stepped over towards the sidewalk and spoke a few words to the groups that had paused to watch; hats were lifted and women stopped talking. As they reached my bench, one of the marchers left

the cortège, came towards us slowly, and pointing towards the fiacre:

"Salute, gentlemen. This is Jaurès. He has just been assassinated."

It was the only news that evening that was true.

My hand at the visor of my cap, I bowed towards him who had loved mankind greatly and who now lay inert, the first victim of the war.

I should have liked to follow the cortège, but it would soon be time for me to report at barracks. I went on, however, as far as the Military School. The Second Regiment of Cuirassiers was to leave at midnight, and I wanted to say good-bye to a friend of mine who was a lieutenant. The square in front of the school swarmed with a subdued crowd, where the news was whispered from mouth to mouth:

"Jaurès is dead . . . Jaurès has been shot."

"By whom?"

"Nobody knows."

I found my friend in the courtyard at the barracks. He gave me a sign:

"We're not leaving tonight."

"What's up? Some delay?"

"No. We are all ready."

"Well?"

He pointed through the fence to the silent crowd packed in the square, congealed like a swarm of sleeping bees.

"Jaurès has been killed. The authorities are apprehensive."

In the yellow flare of the lanterns I could see the courtyard: two hundred horses—a squadron—lined up before the watering-troughs; the same number of men, in cuirass, their carbines slung over their backs, waiting.

Some little time passed; but, in spite of the lateness of the hour, the crowd gave no sign of breaking up. Suddenly a confused murmur rose from the direction of the avenue Duquesne.

"This is going to be a damned nuisance," grumbled my friend.

I strained my ears, but could distinguish nothing in the rumbling of the distant voices.

"Can you hear what they are shouting?"

"No."

His hands behind his back, he rejoined his men. The murmur swelled and, a moment later, I caught a single cry, distinct above the rest:

"Vive l'Armée!"

It was answered by a roar from the square outside the fence:

"Long live the army! Long live the army! . . ."

The colonel of the Second Cuirassiers had unloosed this tribute as he made his way through the throng towards the barracks. All that the crowd had been waiting for was to say good-bye to the regiment.

Chapter 2

I SHALL not linger over the three vain and empty years that preceded my departure for the front, during which my rôle as a soldier was confined to paper-work. A few moments, however, may be retrieved, and among others, three days in October 1914, when I was permitted to approach that terrible and mysterious front at the point where it was then most sinister: at Rheims.

This is how it happened:

Like everybody else, I considered myself then, without quite knowing why, an intimate friend of the commandant of the 22nd Section. It seemed more natural to me to shake his hand when I met him than to lift my own to my cap. Not that we had ever watched our flocks by night together: it was merely that in this way he expiated the inexhaustible cordiality and friendliness that he shed over his four thousand men—so indiscriminately that each one imagined himself the object of an especial preference. He greeted us with a smile that wrinkled his whole face and relieved him of the

necessity of giving orders, his every wish being granted in advance. I never saw him angry but once, and that was with a sick man who refused a leave for convalescence. One morning this extraordinary man held my hand in his while he asked, with his most engaging smile: "You are not doing anything interesting today? . . . Would you like to go to Rheims?" Instantly I assured him that I would. With that smile, he would have won the same response had he suggested my trying to break through the enemy's lines. But he was too much of a gentleman to ask that of me. He had chosen six of us: one enteritis, one myopia, one emphysema, two cirrhoses of the liver, and one gastralgia. By the end of the day, he had succeeded in making all of us believe that we had volunteered.

For the past month the enemy had been slowly strangling Rheims. Its martyrdom had begun by famine, for the Fort de Brimont was in the enemy's hands, and during this first period all convoys were held up some five kilometres from the city. Most of the inhabitants had stayed in their houses, or even in their cellars. But food had soon run short, the Germans having carried off all supplies that could be transported and destroyed the rest. It was now a question of getting a train of bread, salt, and preserves into the city; and our commandant

had chosen the six priests of this new ark from his own bosom.

I have never been modest, except when it was to my advantage to be so; but I fear that on this occasion my vanity soared beyond all bounds. For me, a private in the S. O. S., to venture within five kilometres of the Germans, entrusted with a mission of salvation, seemed to me the maddest recklessness, and I was determined that no one should be left unaware of my coming exploit. Yet I confess that as evening approached, and I had reaped my due meed of honor, even in the kitchens, I began to weigh the imminent reality with more anxiety, and would gladly have exchanged the rôle of a savior about to set out for Rheims, for that of a savior returning from Rheims.

The six "volunteers" were to meet at the ordnance warehouse at five o'clock. Our leader, a commissary sergeant, called the roll and summoned us in such grave tones to confirm our decision to take part in this expedition that—knowing him to be a justice of the peace in civil life—I expected him to add: "Lift your right hand and say, 'I swear that this is the . . .' " He did not go so far as that, but wiped a few drops of sweat off his forehead with a disconcerting solemnity, and asked: "None of you are sick, are you?"—We answered with a

shake of the head, indicating not so much a mere "No" as "What difference would that make?"

The ordnance adjutant, however, did not show us the same consideration. Seventeen years of voluntary service in the army had bred such an indifference to danger in him that he had not once dreamed of leaving Paris since the mobilization, even when the enemy had advanced on the city. The war had found him prepared—in fact, already dug in; for, endowed with those two great military virtues, level-headedness and patience, the retirement from Charleroi had not prevented him from thinking of his own, which was still eight years off. But his rugged, masculine speech counteracted any doubtful impression that his inactivity might otherwise have given. He had the rare gift of making classic phrases, which he scanned by slapping the palm of one hand against his Military Medal: "Those that supply the guns are the brothers of those that receive them."—"My office is my cannon."—"Let them come, I will arm more men than they can kill." You felt that his stern brow encased the same tenacity that had once dictated, in the midst of battle, the famous: "Here I am, and here I shall stay." But the poor man was deceived in himself: two years later he was transferred as a foreman to one of the factories in the valley of the Rhône.

He lined us up before the shelves of revolvers and bayonets coated with grease. Then, glancing over the list: "Out of six men, five limited service . . . Humph! . . . If you are all that is left to defend France . . . Well, we'll give you some equipment." It would plainly have grieved him too deeply to entrust his newest treasures, towards which we were stealing ardent glances, into our unworthy hands. He shouted to one of his clerks in the rear of the office: "Go see if you can find five Model 75 rifles, and five Series Z's." This did not sound promising to me. And my premonition was justified when the clerk came back, tears of delight glistening in his eyes, staggering under five enormous guns, which dated from the Crimean War, and reminded me by their size of the ancient muskets that had decided the victory of Rocroy. He dropped these weapons, with a clatter of hardware, not so much at our feet as on them and, after a second absence, reappeared with five stubby sabres in scabbards of burnished steel, no doubt commandeered from the local police of the ward, and looking as though they might have issued from the marriage of a rapier with a butcher's knife. When adjutants grow witty, there is no checking them. Next we were given cartridges, but this time of the most recent model and as slim as cigarettes. I had no sooner inserted one

in the breech of my musket, than it slid rapidly down the barrel and dropped out the other end. It would have taken a whole package of them to satisfy the calibre of that arquebus. The adjutant choked with joy and stammered between two hiccups: "That's fine! You can go now. You are perfect."

Bulky and clanking like a medieval Flemish night-watch, we invaded the kitchen, for the commandant had told us: "I'm having a little cold lunch put up for you. Don't go off without it." He at least had understood that heroes are children who must be pampered! The sergeant bore down upon a dish-washer: "We have come for the little cold lunch." The dish-washer flapped his wet cloth towards one corner of the stove, spattering drops of greasy water over six tiny bundles wrapped in newspaper, and announced in magnanimous tones: "They saved what was left over from the mess for you."

And he added:

"Have you got your canteens?"

Did we have our canteens? Ah, we might have known that the captain's little cold lunch would have some surprise in it! Those immortal lines echoed in my head:

> Nor the last forgiveness, to those about to die,
> Nor the final kiss, may one deny. . . .

But alas, the dish-washer plunged into a sad story, infinitely clearer in its conclusion than in its details, involving a bucket of wine and a bucket of dish-water and a floor that had to be washed, and the bad luck that had followed him from birth, and the lights that had gone out in the kitchen, and the misfortunes of military service, and the doctrine of fate, and one bucket that had been mistaken for the other, and the Germans who were all pigs, and wine that had got spilled, and a bucket of dish-water, and the necessity of resignation in life, and some weak tea that was left, and a floor that hadn't been washed yet.

It was only too easy to smell what had been washed, however, from the breath that this sewer rat sprayed over us: for if ever we drank in anyone's words, it was that evening.

Finally he confided to each one of us individually that weak tea made him less tired in the legs than the filthy wine that was being issued these days and, taking our canteens, he led us towards a pail which appeared to be full of dish-water that had been spared by fate. But victims do not relish irony. In one leap we were on that dish-washer's back, and I even have a notion that one of us, quite unintentionally—and vigorously—cracked him across the head with the butt of a rifle.

Postponing any examination of the commandant's "little cold lunch" until later, we stowed it away in our knapsacks; and at nine o'clock, having marched across Paris by the most conspicuous avenues, our squad reported at the Gare du Nord.

A dispatcher pointed out the train to us—"our train"; it was an endless string of sealed cars, of which the one nearest to the locomotives had been fitted up for our use with that solicitude for comfort that the Department of Railroads displays in its freight cars.

By the stub of a dripping candle we spread out three bundles of straw; extricated ourselves from our armor and knapsacks; and, with the sliding door pulled shut, thought for the first time of something we had not had time to do before: getting acquainted. We had one thing in common: we were all intimate friends of the commandant. And as nearly as I can remember, this was the only thing that we did have in common; otherwise we were a hardly less heterogeneous group than Bottom's in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The sergeant was a justice of the peace, an unnecessary profession in time of war. I was a student. My neighbor on the right sold starlings and white mice along the sidewalks outside the cafés. The man on my left was a cabinet-maker. I have only a hazy recollection now of the civilian occu-

pations of the other two, but a distinct impression that this was not the first time they had ridden the freights.

In spite of the several steam engines we had to pull us, it was plain that our speed would not make the rails steam. As we should be travelling all night, the justice of the peace, in his wisdom, promptly advised us to go to sleep, and set the example himself. We dropped off to the harsh cadence of the first turns of the wheels. . . .

I woke with a start and sat upright. The train had stopped—and my watch as well; the candle had gone out after spilling large tears, in its death agony, over my coat. In the distance I heard two, then three, and then four, heavy detonations, booming and regular. . . . Artillery firing! . . . That was what had awakened me. I stood up and tried to open the door, but could not budge it.

Meanwhile the ominous thundering ahead of us continued, in a low, sonorous rhythm. . . . Perhaps the guns were trained on us? . . . "Wake up!" I shouted. "Shake a leg! We are being bombarded!" Clutching my rifle, my cap pushed on the back of my head, I had wedged myself into a corner of the car, in the posture of the first soldier on the left in the historic painting of "The Last Cartridge." I may as well admit that I had even drawn the thick short blade of my Series Z. By this

time the whole car was in an uproar in the darkness. The cabinet-maker was hunting vainly under the straw for his rifle, which the dealer in white mice had hidden behind himself, in case, as he explained later, his own should burst. The sergeant was whipping out spasmodic orders, studded with blasphemies and obscene interjections, but whose gist was that we should imitate his calm and not lose our heads.

The thundering drew closer; it was no longer the rumble that had awakened me, but heavy, reverberating blows, coming one after another. "The big guns," murmured one of my comrades. Another voice whispered: "The engineers must have been killed. That's why we are not going ahead." I suggested: "Let's open the door a bit." But the rest protested: "Who is in charge here, you or the sergeant?" From the increasing roar of the explosions, the bombardment was evidently coming still closer, pressing in on our right. The atmosphere was charged with the heavy silence of ultimate thoughts, which the sergeant dissipated with a tactical inspiration: "They must have got around our flank, men; be ready for anything. But don't anybody fire before I do, whatever happens. And now, all together, let's sing the *Marseillaise!*"

As we were about to enter the lists with the young

recruits, in the sixth stanza—keeping approximately together—the gravel along the roadbed crunched under heavy boots; a shaft of yellow light struck across the floor of the car.

Their virtues we shall surely find . . .

Unseen hands shook the door on its rollers.

When on the self-same path we . . .

The door yielded. It grated slowly along its groove.

When on the self . . .

The trampling of boots ceased: a lantern, dangling from a hairy fist, flickered in our faces and a hoarse voice announced in the shadows:

"They're drunk as fools, Sergeant."

The lantern swung back and forth, blinking with surprise at the sight of our caps pushed on the back of our necks and the packages of cartridges that we had ripped open. The voice barked again, this time with admiration:

"Stewed to the gills, Sergeant."

However difficult it may be to rise to heroism, it is no less painful to be jerked down from it: our sergeant let the butt of his rifle fall to the floor and addressed the hairy fist:

"We are Frenchmen. Who are you?"

"The police."

"How long are we going to be left under this artillery fire?"

The voice thickened with relish:

"Did you hear that, Sergeant? Under artillery fire!"

A blue cap with a white band thrust itself past the yellow globe of the lantern, and from beneath it another voice echoed the first in imperative tones:

"Under artillery fire, did you say?"

The sergeant was beginning to grow nervous at this repetition of his words.

"Under bombardment, then, if you like that better. I don't want to expose my men to any unnecessary danger."

The voice under the cap took on a note of compassion:

"Under bombardment, eh? That's what you said, isn't it? Under bombardment?"

The hoarse voice chimed in again:

"That's what he said, Sergeant: under bombardment!"

This frivolous conversation could not go on indefinitely; the booming had grown more insistent; at any moment—so treacherous are the hills of Champagne—

we might become the prey of a flank movement. Realizing this, our sergeant interrupted:

"In the first place, where are we?"

The hoarse voice answered with surprise:

"At Saint-Denis Plain, of course. Where did you think?"

And with sympathetic tolerance it added:

"You are outside the Paris city limits all right, but that is no reason for yelling your heads off."

The yellow lantern, the hairy fist, the cap, and the boots disappeared. A few scraps of phrases fluttered back to us in the night:

". . . drunk as fools . . ."

". . . under bombardment, he said. . . ."

A moment later, a long train, drawn up on the track at our right, heaved, shuddered throughout its fifty vertebræ, and slowly got under way. In each freight car, eight horses (lengthwise) hammered the echoing walls in salvos and gusts with their iron hoofs. The thundering they made was enough to shatter your ear-drums. The sergeant levelled a glance of hatred at me which checked the *Marseillaise* on my lips, as I was about to begin whistling: he would certainly have emptied his rifle into my belly.

Were it not that these Memoirs are devoted to truth,

I should choose the hours that followed this episode for tracing the intricacies of a Platonic dialogue between the cabinet-maker, the justice of the peace, the two cirrhoses of the liver, and the dealer in white mice, on the unreliability of the senses. The justice of the peace would have observed, with some subtlety, that Reason suffers for the faithless senses as a good master for his unworthy servants. But the truth is that I have no recollection of such a conversation, nor of anything like it. The only profit I drew from my blunder was, strictly speaking, more philological than philosophical; for I was invested from head to foot with such bitter and varied insults that even the significance of some of them escaped me. Afterwards, when my comrades in fortune, having yelped and growled for a brief moment like young dogs, were once more suckling at the warm breasts of sleep, darkness, and silence, I recapitulated the insults that had been heaped upon me; not one was original: all of these phrases were ancient and traditional. I realized that, in the search for comparisons by which to humiliate me, my companions' resentment had found only precious, well loved, and useful things—deep sources of the joy in human hearts and of the opulence of our countrysides; things that have been divinely sung by the tenderest of poets. And to aggravate their insults,

they had conferred on me gratuitously the two highest of human dignities, those of being ancient and an object of divine attention. Not one of my companions but would have gratefully received the lesser of the two treasures to which they had compared me; for about one of them centred the honor of their wives, and to the other they owed the nourishment of their earliest infancy. In spite of my diligence in searching for points of analogy, I was forced to admit, in all humility, that I was not worthy of these precious slanders.

So, remembering Turenne, who slept on his gun-carriage, I resolved to follow his example, at least so far as my situation permitted; and, with my cheek planted firmly on the butt of my rifle, I once more fell asleep in the straw, now sprinkled with cartridges.

I was awakened by a sharp little dawn wind, which rustled the straw through the slot under the door and nibbled at the ends of my fingers. A gray light filtered into the car through innumerable cracks, and I gently massaged my cheek, where the trigger, trigger-guard, sight, and cock of my pillow had been neatly etched. It was not long before I became aware of a powerful scent emanating from my comrades in the innocence of their

sleep; in fact, it was perhaps this that had awakened me. In the back of the sergeant's gaping mouth I could contemplate the little black craters of decaying molars, which enriched the flatness of his gastralgic breath as it travelled past them. Beyond him, I observed, with silent reproach, the cabinet-maker's huge feet sticking out of a tuft of straw—giant's feet attached to scrawny ankles. I could not but feel that, in his sickly body, these feet led a life of their own; and that, in the pitiless vice of shoes which were plainly too small for them, it was a life of torture and martyrdom. Escaped for the moment from their prison, they breathed freely. For, although they had failed to conquer the boots, they had easily subdued the socks: swathed in nameless cloths which months before had lost any resemblance even to mittens, they reminded me of those twin bundles of flesh and rags that old women hold up to carriage doors in winter to beg for a few sous.

One of the two-without-any-definable-profession slept with his shirt unbuttoned, revealing a gorilla's chest, obscenely hairy, where the breeze played as in a field of alfalfa. The dealer in white mice had taken off neither his shoes nor his coat. He lay curled up in the rear of the car, his head between his arms, his collar turned up over his nose, his hands tucked in his sleeves, and his

feet drawn up to his buttocks, as if he were sleeping on a park bench, preserved in the rank odor of his livestock.

Thank God for the morning wind! In a few minutes it had washed the sleep out of our eyes, dusted the car, and swept the floor. Thanks to it, we found ourselves, with little effort, alert, bristling, and talkative. Over the shoulders of a lovely range of low hills climbed a fat, wheezy sun, devoid of any majesty; a graceless ascension, prophesying a reign without beauty.

The time had now come to examine the fruit of our commandant's tender care, that "little cold lunch" which, in the excitement of leaving, we had packed away the evening before in our knapsacks. A wave of gratitude rose within us for our good friend, whose concern had extended even to our future.

Taloche, the singing teacher of starlings, was the first to open up his duffle, announcing that he felt ready to "stuff his guts," according to the noble expression of that Palatine princess who prized vigor in speech as highly as in lackeys.

"For once we get something decent to eat," sighed the cabinet-maker.

"I could chew nails myself," admitted the sergeant.

By now we had all of us drawn out our little bundles

wrapped in newspaper; and someone remarked that in any case the commandant had fulfilled his promise, for no lunch in the world could ever be smaller or colder than this one.

The cabinet-maker sniffed his paper:

"It's fish."

The justice of the peace took a whiff of his:

"Smells like cheese to me."

The teacher of etiquette for white mice waved his greasy bundle under his nostrils with the timid sensuality of an Infanta smelling a rose.

"It might be fish just the same."

But a voice from the rear of the car settled the dispute.

"I have opened my little sachet: it's fish with cheese inside of it."

God will forgive you for it, Captain, and I should be the last to prevent him from doing so, but it was the truth. In each package, like a boa stifling a hind, a strip of salt herring had been wrapped three times around a piece of camembert, whose soft flesh had yielded and burst open. The effect was really surprisingly like that of a Barye group, or a creamed cabbage, except that such a hind and boa would have been overcome by their own exhalations, and that creamed cabbages, even when they

have passed the age limit, have a less riotous breath; for we could not hurl that dreadful delicacy out fast enough or far enough to keep it from impregnating our car down to the last nail with its sturdy odor.

Meanwhile our convoy was rolling through one country station after another with the arrogance of an express. It is true, however, that we rolled through so gently that when the train finally did come to a full stop, it was several moments before we were aware of the change.

"There must be a speck of dust on the rails," suggested the cabinet-maker.

We were in open country. A second lieutenant of artillery was explaining some obscure problem to the engineers, who were leaning out of their cab. The lieutenant held a tiny map and a large pencil, with which he pointed insistently towards one spot on the map. The sergeant went forward for news, and in a few minutes came back with full details:

"We are getting near Rheims, and the lieutenant is going to ride with the engineers to see that they stop in time. We have been protected so far by hills, but it seems that the hills won't last much longer, and then, if we kept on going, we'd come out in the open . . ."

He hesitated, and finished with a stern glance at me:

". . . under artillery fire."

This time it was true. The batteries of heavy artillery at Brimont, a few kilometres ahead, had proved to be touchy gate-keepers of the city; trains that had tried to disregard them had been overwhelmed with remonstrances, the mildest of which weighed a couple of hundred pounds. Whereupon the railway administration had forbidden any further attempts.

As the train got under way again, we once more adjusted our warlike harness. Two maids from Toboso would not have been too much to help us. The sergeant especially, in trying to fasten his rifle, cartridge belt, and knapsack together, had evolved a complicated system of crossed straps held by thongs which were secured to tabs on a pair of suspenders reinforced by two bands which were made fast on the opposite shoulders by hooks which three slings connected with a belt which was supported by a shoulder-strap; and thanks to this combination, he explained that he could get into his equipment in one minute on the blackest night; which, when you come to think of it, was a marvellous result, considering that the same operation, in broad daylight, took him a full half hour.

Suddenly, by some caprice of the wind, a low muffled rumbling reached us, like the drone of thousands of bees, or an endless procession of chariots driving across a

distant bridge. The sound was so faint that all other sounds passed through it as if it had been a gas, and even those close to us failed to disturb it: a deep pervasive hum, an insubstantial murmur, without pulsations, so slight that my ears were barely aware of it, yet so insistent that my hands, my eyes, and my mouth felt its presence.

The persuasive and hypnotic voice of war—a tranquil voice charged with the silence of death!

Chapter 3

WE were seated all six in a row on the floor of the car, our feet dangling outside, silently watching the hills slip by. At the foot of a low slope, the train slackened speed, moved forward again, and then stopped. What a strange creature that heavy convoy was, as timorous as a fawn driven into the open along the edge of a woods!

The lieutenant was walking up and down beside the locomotive, consulting his watch. He hailed the sergeant:

"We are not going on for a while yet. If your men want to stretch their legs . . ."

We jumped down on the embankment. A footpath wound gently up the bank and at its crest a little old woman, shaky with age, and leaning on a pair of crutches as over a balcony, was gently chewing the void between her gums. I strolled towards her, advancing slowly and pausing to examine the weeds, so as not to frighten her away. She watched my approach, her head cocked on one side like an alert parrot's.

"Well, granny, it looks like rain, doesn't it?"

She took a mouthful of air and rolled it about in her cheeks, which may—for all I know—be the way a sensitive palate distinguishes between "rainy" and "variable," as if between Beaune and Chambertin wine.

"You don't think we'll have a little sun just the same?" she concluded, staring at me from small shrivelled eyes edged with pink. One should never deprive the aged of their hope of sunshine, and I replied, "Well, we'll see . . ." with an air that promised more than appeared on the surface of my words. She looked me over once more with that long peasant stare that does not miss a single button-hole:

"You're going to the war this early in the morning?"

"Yes . . ." And I added: "We are going to see the Germans. Have you seen them yet?"

She shook her head: "At the beginning of the war they came by here. . . . But that was a long time ago."

"Oh! a long time. . . ."

A chuckle rattled in her throat, and she beckoned me to come closer:

"I have some news."

In those days, news was so uncertain and so rare that it was a windfall to encounter any. The old woman scrutinized me again before confiding in me. Then, having

evidently received a good impression, she whispered:

"The Emperor has been beaten. . . ."

Even this good old peasant woman had heard of that! She chuckled again:

". . . But it doesn't matter. . . ."

As I looked puzzled, her peeled eyes winked slyly:

"It would have been better if he hadn't been, but it doesn't matter. . . ."

Not wishing to show her any lack of respect, I turned about to start back to the train, but she hopped after me:

"It doesn't matter, because the Marshal is in Metz with a hundred thousand men."

"Marshal who?" I asked.

Balanced between her two crutches, she made a scanty, droll curtsey, in honor of the name she was about to speak:

"Bazaine, young man, Marshal Bazaine!"

Poor old woman! I did not laugh at your good news, and you must have seen that I shared the joy of your great secret, which you had kept a little too long perhaps, until your memory had quietly fallen asleep on it and another war had come to rouse you. I should even have asked you more questions, had the sergeant not called me back at that moment with a coarseness of

language that was in direct proportion to the urgency of my return.

The train moved on again, with no more apparent reason than for its stopping. As we disappeared around the curve, I gave a last glance towards the path: the old woman was picking her way down, pushing aside the pebbles with her crutches, and scanning the ground for the perils that spring up under a pair of wooden sabots —always too big for little old women—but happy, thanks to Bazaine who was in Metz.

The hills dwindled now into low, thick-set mounds. From time to time the lieutenant thrust his head out of the window of the locomotive; and the sergeant, feeling that great events were at hand, had extracted a bundle from his overcoat. At first I mistook this bundle for a dilapidated directory which had been stripped of its binding; but it turned out to be the lists, shipping papers, invoices, inventories, receipts, stubs, duplicates, additions, bills, and transfers, that had been turned over to him on our departure. Every size, from news-sheet to confetti, was represented in this assortment of papers. I asked the sergeant if he had not forgotten the service record of a single potato; but, whatever Rabelais may have said, nothing was less natural to this man than

laughter. He pestered me with absurd questions:

"How much does 2472 plus 7389 make?"

"132 piles of 17 loaves of bread each—how many loaves does that give us?"

But he left me in peace after he had asked if I remembered what had been put in the fourteenth car and I had answered:

"The rest of the papers."

It was nine o'clock when, glancing up by the locomotive, I saw the lieutenant waving a little red flag in answer to another officer a hundred yards farther on, who was also waving a little red flag; in politics, this is usually a signal for full speed ahead, but in railroads it appears to be the opposite.

The lieutenant came back to our car:

"We are here. You can unload your stuff now. And I would advise you to do it as fast as possible."

And he added:

"Stack it up in front of the station."

My eyes surveyed the unbroken space that surrounded us. It was true there was a grade crossing, a railroad signal, and a switch, but as for a station? . . . Finally I realized that at the lieutenant's feet lay a pile of several hundred charred bricks covered with bits of glass, and on top of this debris a few twisted, rec-

tangular metal signs on which one could almost read:

WAITI . . . ROOM

. . . AINT-BRICE

BAG . . . GE

As the sky was beginning to cloud over, the lieutenant finished his instructions:

"Anything that might get spoiled you had better put in the freight shed . . ."

He indicated a thicket of iron rods from which a few molecules of window glass flapped in the breeze.

". . . but don't block up the benches if you can help it."

And to avoid any possibility of misunderstanding, he pointed out what appeared to be two ashy and blackened joists, gutted by fire and balanced precariously on little mounds of cast iron coated with soot.

He came back a moment later to add:

"The Commissary Department is over there."

He waved towards a sort of tiny Punch and Judy box, built of planks and set on a sheet of corrugated tin as if in a saucer; on one side was an entrance like the door of a kennel. In front of this edifice a wooden sign had been erected:

COMMISSARY OFFICES AND ADMINISTRATION

By some sleight-of-hand an officer, whose dimensions in a state of freedom were considerably greater than those of the building he inhabited, emerged from it at this moment. After studying our string of cars meditatively, he announced:

"Well, we'll have to get busy and unload this."

Whereupon he thrust his hands comfortably into his pockets, to give us clearly to understand that he was using "we" in a purely figurative sense.

The sergeant grew apprehensive:

"There are only six of us, Lieutenant, and there are fourteen cars. You haven't got a few men, have you, that could . . . ?"

The lieutenant scratched his head.

"A few men? Hmmm . . . What have you got in those cars? Food?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we can take care of you."

He called to a little girl of six, who was squatting on the ground playing with chunks of plaster—perhaps the Town Hall. I could not hear what he said to her, but he had no sooner finished than she disappeared at a run.

"Just wait here a few minutes," he told us. "I think I have a crew for you."

He consulted his watch.

"We'll be done in an hour."

The good man was surely dreaming, I reflected. Even with twenty of us it would take at least until noon. But not to waste any time he continued:

"Have you got the papers, Sergeant?"

He took the bundle in both arms, asking anxiously:

"You are sure they are all here?"

He retreated with them to the "Commissary Offices and Administration," revolving the corrugated tin like a turn-table, so as to bring the front towards our train; then, meeting the difficulties one at a time, he first inserted his cap through the dog-hole, then the bundle of papers, and finally wriggled in himself.

When a soldier has nothing to do, he takes a drink; if there is nothing to drink, he eats; and if there is nothing to eat, he smokes. I crossed the tracks to borrow a light from a soldier who was pumping up a bicycle tire, after putting on an emergency patch, and took advantage of the opportunity to orient myself.

"What town is this? I mean, what town was it?"

"Saint-Brice."

"Is it far from here to Rheims?"

"Three kilometres."

He called my attention to the little puffs of smoke that

were floating up on the horizon: white puffs that soared upwards like poplars, gray ones dappled like beeches, and black ones that jetted up on slim shafts, opening out in the sky like palms. The wind beat them down, and others at once sprang up in their places.

"Is that Brimont firing?"

"Yes, this is their hour of the day."

"I suppose you are on your way to Rheims?"

"I am, and I'm late at that. So long."

I watched him set off, crouching over his handle bars. In the deep ruts of the road, the movement of his bicycle was transformed into a hard trot, which from time to time jounced his feet off the pedals. He stopped once more, to straighten the handle bars, and then continued towards the forest of dissolving trees, into which he vanished, driven on by all his strength, by all the speed and all the consciousness of his duty in him.

A moment later, I saw what I took to be our reinforcements arriving; a group of horsemen jogging towards us, encased in the stiff folds of their great-coats, their heads shrunken in the depths of their big, upturned blue hoods. They were heavy with rain, mud, and fatigue; spattered with bits of straw and plaster; and perched on huge horses coated with dry mud to the bellies. They rode at an easy pace, silent, weary, frozen

to the saddles, their boots dangling in low stirrups.

A soldier behind me nudged my elbow.

"For God's sake, salute!"

I realized then that three tarnished stars could just be distinguished against the dark night of the great blue cloak on the first horse; and two more glimmered on the next. The others bore only washed-out stripes, which on closer view seemed to be something in the way of insignia after all.

The division commander nodded his head to us as he passed, and I caught a good view of his face. All expression in it slumbered, the lips parted, the eyes half-hidden under the lids, the brow relaxed, the moustache rumpled: it was the inoffensive and kindly face of a peaceful old man. Yet he too was picking his way over the ruts towards the phantom forest.

I was about to lose myself in philosophic reflections on this subject, when a stupendous racket brought my attention irresistibly back to the road: over the crest of the hill—the girl of six in the lead—tumbled a mob of wheelbarrows, a swarm of baskets, bags, shoulder baskets, and boxes, pushed, pulled, or waved in the air, by some sixty girls and women, and innumerable children. Young mothers clasped their babes in one arm and dragged carts with the other. Those who had not been

able to find a wheelbarrow, or a basket, or a box, were pushing baby-carriages; others had unearthed vast peasant valises from their attics. Those who had no valises had caught up the corners of their aprons, and those without aprons, of their petticoats. The wheelbarrows squealed like ferrets, boxes rattled, and the few unoccupied hands slapped the children, who squealed like the wheelbarrows. At the grade crossing, where I had retreated just in time, a fearful scene was enacted: the little girl of six withdrew her five fingers from her mouth and nose, where she had been keeping them busy, and brandished them towards our train. The horde executed an impetuous right turn.

"The Redskins attacking a mosque," whispered the cabinet-maker, who was erudite in his way.

The commissary lieutenant had leaped from his hut and was running from one end of the train to the other, in a sort of Orphic delirium.

"Here they are! Here they are! Break the seals! Open the doors! I knew they would come! Good for the women! Sergeant, you issue them bread! This way, girls! All those with baskets, unload these cans!—Wheelbarrows over here! Wheelbarrows this way!—The baby-carriages take the bread!—Get in line and pass it along to each other!—Pile those bags of salt by the benches!

—Hey, you, standing over there like a flower-pot . . ."

That meant me.

". . . pick up that baby! Can't you see it is crying?"

O discipline, what crimes are committed in thy name!

He patted the women on the shoulder, and chucked the girls under the chin; inadvertently he may even have kissed a few.

"That's the way! Take care you don't fall! Start on that fourth pile next! You're trying to carry too much, little girl!"

The uproar must have been audible at Brimont, yet no retribution fell on us.

While I cradled the little puling bundle, which I would gladly have dropped into the grease cup of the locomotive, the cars were emptied; pyramids, heaps, mounds, piles, rose and swelled. Everyone out of swaddling clothes carried, pushed, and pulled; while the youngsters trumpeted the charge. One five-year-old atom was rolling jars of preserves like hogsheads; and seven infants who had barely outgrown diapers crawled around a loaf of bread like ants around a stone. Naturally it would take less than an hour with such methods as these!

Eventually I realized that a voice, twenty yards away, was bawling at me:

"Why don't you give that baby back? Give it back, damn it! We'll see whether he refuses to give it back to you!"

A fresh young woman, unfortunately dripping with sweat, which blinded me to her charms, snatched the baby angrily out of my arms.

"And he hasn't even been nursed!" she scolded.

What could she expect? . . .

The lieutenant was passing rapidly down the line:

"What did you carry?"

"Bread."

"Take two loaves."

"And you, madame?"

"Preserves."

"Take two jars."

"And you?"

"Salt."

"Take a small bag."

"And you?"

"Rice."

"Fill your basket."

"You?"

"Cheeses."

"Take four of them."

Having arrived at the end of the line, he turned towards his hut and shouted in a loud voice:

"And don't you let me see you do it!"

Thus it was that before feeding Rheims, we fed Saint-Brice.

When the populace that had been roused by this military tribune had been persuaded to retire, on our oath that there were no more trains to come, the lieutenant crossed over to us.

"They have finished at Brimont for the day."

We looked and saw that the wind was blowing down the last gray leaves that still fluttered against the sky, and, in their place, a few humble, wretched houses were sprinkled along the road, like the trail of poor relations after a hearse. Beyond them Rheims, huddled about its cathedral, rose from the level plain in an ordered mass, unstudied but harmonious, like those buildings that thirteenth-century painters erected in the outspread palm of the donor, or that Carpaccio placed in miniature in his backgrounds.

The Coriolanus of Saint-Brice explained:

"They do this every morning. They bombard for an hour. Then the rest of the day they are quiet, now that the trains have stopped going in. We will send all this up by truck. They don't pay so much attention to the

roads. You can eat lunch here and spend the afternoon in Rheims, if that interests you. But be sure you are back here this evening. You are returning to Paris by way of Epernay. The train leaves here at eight o'clock."

We lunched as if in some mythical land of plenty, hewing walls of bread, digging into floors of corned meat, and draining deep wells of Algerian wine, which flowed like the blood of steers.

After lunch we helped load our left-overs on the four trucks that had come to carry them away. Enough remained to keep them busy hauling all afternoon.

The sergeant watched them as they rumbled off.

"Now we can go up there too."

In my innocence, I imagined that I was finishing his thought by adding:

"Yes, thank God, now that they have stopped firing."

But he corrected me sternly:

"Now that we have had something to eat."

At the lieutenant's suggestion, we left our knapsacks in a pile in one corner, and our rifles in a heap which, for the sake of military usage, we referred to as a "stack," but which looked more like a game of spilikins at the beginning of a round.

It is as true of roads as of men that there are no two alike. There are main highways, laden with business,

commerce, and trade, which cannot be persuaded to leave the telegraph lines on any excuse, and which go less from town to town than from bank to factory. Such roads are stingy with their time, always noting just how many kilometres they have gone, and taking no liberties with their distances, but running as straight as the columns in a ledger, or curving like an embrace; as tidy as clerks, and as dependable as cashiers. Gardens, parks, streams, or ruins, would seem as scandalous along their borders as naughty scribblings on a convent wall. At the most, their indulgences do not go beyond tall trees, as stiff and regular as the backs of law books.

Then there are carefree roads, the natural children of love and nature, which stray off at every provocation, are disturbed by no thoughts, and whose only preoccupation—if they might be said to have one—seems to be to go nowhere. You must never expect anything serious or weighty from such roads as these: dressed like lords in summer and like beggars in winter, they scamper up hills like boys climbing trees, and slide down the other side so recklessly that you are as likely as not to land at the bottom with broken bones. Of course such roads usually come to a bad end: some are drowned in rivers they have jumped into on moonless nights; others are lost in a forest where suddenly, hunt as hard as you

may, it is impossible to find them again: the wolves have eaten them; sometimes four or five of them come together, each one more disreputable than the next, and over nothing at all, the green petticoat of a hawthorn or a nest of blackbirds, they fall to fighting, wrestle together, roll on the ground, strangle each other to death, and leave you there lost: they have eaten each other completely up, except for the tip of their tail, which wriggles off through the tall grass.

As a result of not having learned this sooner, we made the mistake of neglecting the main highway, which plodded towards Rheims as stolidly as a farmer to market and would have taken us there in an hour, for a path which, out of pure whim, at the place where we were, pretended to be a short-cut. And I must admit that at first it rushed us off like a drunken driver; but it soon stumbled against the canal, backed up as far as it had come, just missed getting lost a dozen times, persisted in trying to jump over a pond that was too big for it, and then ran in the hot sun to dry itself off. In short, it was four o'clock when we left it on the outskirts of Rheims, which it no sooner caught sight of than it forgot us entirely and fled like the devil from holy-water. It is probably still running.

Other soldiers were going into the city, and we fol-

lowed them. At the dismantled railway station we separated, after agreeing to meet at the train for the return to Paris. I had announced:

"I am going to visit the cathedral."

At these words Taloche, the dealer in white mice, had stayed with me; he was engaged in the Herculean task of cleaning his nails with a splinter of glass. When the others had gone, he gave me a wink, smacked his lips, nudged me in the ribs, and chuckled softly with an obscene air of complicity.

"I say it as shouldn't, old man, but I smell mischief in your bones."

He grinned, screwed up his eyes, and whispered to me behind the back of his hand:

"So that's what takes your eye, eh? Well, I won't say it doesn't take mine too."

He chuckled again and murmured:

"How about it, shall we visit the cathedral? You certainly had a ripe idea that time."

Could it be possible that Taloche was an esthete? Like Ingres with his violin, did he cultivate architecture on the side? He certainly appeared delighted at the prospect of this visit. So much the better: if he knew a little about cathedrals, his comments might prove amusing.

"Are you familiar with this one?" I asked.

"A little. I used to come here on business during Holy Week and my hotel was only a few doors away. . . . Talk about the racket that used to go on in there!"

This surprised me, but he explained:

"Especially on Sunday, when they whanged the piano."

Evidently Taloche was no partisan of the organ.

"Did you visit it?" I asked.

He cleared his throat:

"Once."

And he added promptly:

"Nothing wrong, you understand. I just went to see."

"They tell me the figures are marvellous."

His little round eyes glittered:

"You've said it! All young and graceful."

Taloche's notions of sculpture were at least original.

"But the music?" I continued.

Taloche shrugged his shoulders:

"Today isn't Sunday, but we can get along without that. That isn't what you go there for, is it?"

"No," I admitted, "but still, without music . . ."

Taloche leered at me:

"That's what you say, but you're probably no different from the rest of us when you come down to it."

What possible connection could there be between

cathedral services and Taloche's opinion of me? But he left me no time to reflect on this problem: with a gleam in his eyes, he shuffled his feet and urged:

"Let's go visit that cathedral, old man. You suggested it yourself."

And as an inducement he concluded:

"You'll see Leah, the tall one. She drinks champagne out of a slipper."

Then I remembered what the euphemism "go visit the cathedral" meant for certain travellers, and recognized the infamous hope that Taloche had been cherishing. I made an effort to bring him back to reason.

"Taloche, you have a filthy mind. And what is worse, your filthy mind can't see beyond its own nose. How can you imagine, with shells flying . . . ?"

A smirk spread over his face.

"That was just what got me."

The man was sincere, at least; in the mire of his soul, as in the cultivated soil of the most exquisite spirits, the glowing rose of love was inextricably entwined about the pale lily of death; their perfumes were intermingled, and I mused upon the monstrous sacrifices to Priapus with which public cataclysms and terrors had always been accompanied. Taloche would have been one of those slaves in Pompeii, petrified in the moment of their

indulgence and hurled, unknowing, from the oblivion of lust into the abyss of death.

He was grumbling now with disappointment:

"Well, shall we go look at your cathedral?"

Towering above the roofs of the houses, it seemed only a few steps away; but to reach it we were forced to wind through a mare's nest of streets, doubling on ourselves, stopping to take our bearings, and plunging into crooked alleys.

⁂

Suddenly Taloche, who was trailing behind me, sighed, caught my elbow, and pointed down a narrow street with his thumb:

"That's where I meant. . . ."

It was a large house sliced in half by a shell, like a melon that had been cut by a knife. High up on what was left of the dismal gray façade, under the edge of a scaly roof, clung a row of huge black letters, evidently the end of a word:

. . . COME

"Hotel Welcome," perhaps?

Taloche was in ecstasy.

" 'Come'!" he echoed. "Talk about a fine sign for a

bawdy house! And plenty of good fellows have come, too!"

It was true. In the street, a hundred or more soldiers were smoking and chatting, or reading the newspaper, standing quietly in line.

I still found it hard to believe. . . .

"Are you sure, Taloche?"

"Listen to him! He wants to know if I'm sure. . . . Why, you could fix one of those houses up to look like a police station, and I'd know it on sight! Look at those windows. . . ."

Although it was still daylight, the shutters were all closed; and where shutters were missing, planks had been nailed in their place. On those that could be reached from the sidewalk, hearts—and other things—had been daubed in big blotches of ink or red crayon.

"The little darlings are well guarded," said Taloche gleefully. "Nobody can steal them."

On each side of the door, two orderlies in uniform, their chin-straps sitting snugly in place, caps pulled down over their eyes, the flaps of their great-coats buttoned back, belt and shoulder-sling complete, and cartridge boxes at the waist, bore witness to the solicitude of the authorities. Leaning against the wall, their hands

hidden in the folds of their coats, and their eyes fixed vaguely on space, they suffered a stream of questions from the honorable clientele to flow over them without losing their dignified nonchalance.

"Say, old man, do you take the money?"

"Let's have their pictures to look at while we're waiting."

"Is it true that the best one of the bunch is your sister?"

"Do you play the pianola?"

To the wittier taunts they replied with the compliant and discreet smiles of governesses. Every two or three minutes the door opened halfway, disgorged a hilarious or grave soldier, and a voice from within cried:

"Next!"

The candidate entered, the orderly blocked the door with his foot, and the next in line unbuckled his belt.

Taloche, his eyes on the shuttered windows, nodded his head:

"Say what you like, there are some swell girls in there!"

And as I tried to lead him away, he buttonholed a strapping blond infantryman, who was coming up the street, his arms dangling, his knees loose.

"Did you just come out?" asked Taloche admiringly.

The infantryman nodded his head, and then added thoughtfully:

"They don't even give you time to take off your boots."

Taloche chortled with delight:

"Mass production these days! How many are there, eh?"

"Four rooms. That makes eight, I suppose."

"Good-looking?"

"I only saw mine and the one with the other fellow. . . . They're no chickens. Pretty beefy. . . ."

"Are they nice?"

"You don't have much time to talk. . . . 'Hello, boys' . . . 'Bye-bye, little one.' . . . All in the family."

"Except when it comes to leaving the dough."

"You give whatever you want; they're satisfied."

"I suppose," commented Taloche, "they are more interested in the quantity. . . ."

Eventually I succeeded in leading him away, engrossed in silent calculations. At the end of the street, I glanced back. The blond infantryman was straggling along behind us, and had stopped at the last in line—who immediately became the next to the last. "Pretty beefy . . . Hello, boys . . . Bye-bye, little one. . . ."

Be generous, O Saint Marys of Egypt, to these poor boatmen!

We had reached the square in front of the cathedral, this time the real one. . . . In the gutter, the charred chassis of an automobile writhed in frozen contortions. A rope had been stretched around the cathedral, at some distance from the building, and it was forbidden to enter. Sentinels, with taut chin-straps, mounted guard. Before one of them, a little lieutenant was scolding and gesticulating angrily. The sentinel, timid and deferential, replied with a pantomime of unyielding but respectful regret.

"But I am an officer!"

"I know, Lieutenant, but nobody, Lieutenant, nobody . . . not even a colonel."

"This is ridiculous."

"I can't help it, Lieutenant . . . Really, I can't. . . . If you were my own mother . . ."

The lieutenant strode away, slapping his boots with his crop.

"Taloche, old man, it looks as if we aren't going to visit it this time."

The disappointment did not seem to weigh on Taloche's soul. But, fortunately for me, Taloche's soul was a human soul, where good and bad were mixed, and where a desire to give me pleasure rivalled the need to

outwit a sentinel and the joy of humiliating a timorous lieutenant.

"Pull up your chin-strap," he said, adjusting his own.

We approached the sentinel with dragging feet and our hands in our pockets; Taloche had already planned his tactics.

"You certainly put that lieutenant in his place."

"It would take more than him to get me in the lock-up."

"That's the stuff! . . . Besides, if they let everybody in that comes along, how the hell can we get our work done?"

And he added complacently:

"We have to clear out the rubbish."

Then, in sudden apprehension:

"You didn't let anybody run off with my wheelbarrow, did you?"

He stepped over the rope, with the reluctance of a man returning to work, and we trailed across the square to the main entrance.

The cathedral was empty; the fire had already gutted it, but to tell the truth, I did not find it too badly destroyed; less, at any rate, than I had expected. Here and there lay the seared corpses of Germans, like great

black cocoons; and, scattered over the pavement, twisted spikes as long and heavy as hammers; a few splinters of stone. And that was all. The building was a vast cave. Taloche followed me about, bored, indifferent, and silent. He had picked up a helmet near the entrance.

In the chancel, I was just in time to stop him on the altar steps.

"I was going to say mass for you."

As he will never read these lines, I may express my own opinion, which is that Taloche had intended to see whether any precious objects had not been left, by oversight, around the tabernacle. For he was devoid of feeling and respect. At the foot of one pillar, an exquisite cherub's head had fallen from a capital, and I was forced to explain at great length to Taloche that he had no right to carry it away; that it was a sacred ruin and would one day resume its rightful place; that this stone belonged first to God and then to France. Finally I convinced him, and he disappeared on a tour of exploration in the shadows of the confessionals.[1]

[1] *Publisher's note:—We take pleasure at this point in congratulating the author of these Memoirs on the handsome stone paper-weight that decorates his writing-table; this little masterpiece, the product of marvellous medieval craftsmanship, represents the head of a child, whose angelic expression is most striking.*

Suddenly there was a sharp, dry whine, and a shell burst in the nave. I had never heard one so close before, and it gave me the same lurch in the pit of my stomach that an elevator gives when it drops too fast. For a full and undivided sense of the desecration of God's House, nothing, I believe, can equal the experience of standing within it while it is being fired upon. From the gloom of the transept, a voice rendered sepulchral and pious by the majestic echoes murmured:

"God damn!"

A second shell, imperious and shattering made the porch tremble and the roof of my mouth grow dry. I called:

"Taloche! Taloche!"

His head between his shoulders, his legs wavering, and his cheeks pale—I felt myself growing a bit wan—he edged towards me, forcing a grimace.

"It's not that I'm afraid, you understand, but I hate loud noises."

Clamping our knees together to keep them from shaking, and straining our ears, we waited for the third; a thread could not have passed between my teeth. Finally, as nothing broke the silence, Taloche remarked in a voice that he did his best to make casual:

"Say, old man, I don't want you to think I am bored

here, but perhaps we had better start along, so as not to miss that train."

Hugging the walls and pillars, we made our way to the door. As I pushed it open and we stepped out, I heard Taloche mutter:

"This is going to be terrible!"

The fool might at least have kept his impressions to himself!

As far as the houses extended, we kept up a smart pace. At the corner of one street, Taloche pointed to a gaping window pane and the distorted remnants of a zinc bar; his eyes dilated with horror:

"My God! They even bombard the cafés, the heathens!"

As we were the last to arrive at the rendezvous, the sergeant and the cabinet-maker had taken advantage of our absence to heap up all the straw in the car into two soft litters. They gave us the news:

"We start in a little while. They are going to hitch our car to a train of wounded that are being shipped back to Paris."

It was true. In a few minutes a long convoy slid softly up beside us; large crosses had been painted on the sides of the cars, and at the doors appeared pale faces and

bandaged arms; the shades of one car were drawn. We were attached to the rear car and quietly, without whistling, the train set off again.

Had Providence owed us this triumphal return? For this was not only a train of suffering, but a train of glory as well. At every station, crowds surrounded us. Women came out on the platform with tea; elderly gentlemen brought cigars; nurses carried trays of tarts, chocolate, and cigarettes. And at every station, Taloche and the cabinet-maker roared in tones at once sonorous and plaintive:

"Over here! This way! this way! Heh, Madame! Madame!"

Guided by their cries, these generous souls passed swiftly by the silent cars and fell upon ours, pushing each other aside in their solicitude. Taloche calmed outbursts of pity and turned them to practical use. Feverish words fluttered up from our good Samaritans:

"Ah, poor boys!"

"Are you in pain? You must be brave!"

"And those two inside who can't get up?"

That was the sergeant and myself. The cabinet-maker shook his head:

"Ah, those poor fellows, Madame! . . ."

His mouth stuffed, and his lips smeared with jelly, the sergeant was lying on the straw beside me; between two bites of a sandwich he whispered:

"There are still a few good hearts left in the world."

He could hardly have been speaking of Taloche, whom I heard at that moment thundering:

"Let that little girl with the cigars get by!"

The train was already under way, while Taloche and the cabinet-maker, with outstretched arms, were gathering in a final round of food and presents, which they piled up on the straw behind them.

Between stations, lying flat on their bellies, they shared the booty, except for one five-franc piece, which Taloche slipped unobtrusively into his shoe.

In the station at Meaux, Taloche and the cabinet-maker, who had grown outrageously drunk, overstepped all bounds of decency; they were bawling at a nervous little old man, who stammered:

"Come, come, boys, you are gallant fellows . . ." and tapped Taloche on the back with the tips of his fingers as though he had been a skittish mare. But his efforts were in vain; Taloche uttered a tragic, Byronic laugh:

"Hell, no! We're not wounded! We have just been out fishing, that's all! Wounded? Of course not!"

Surrounded by a hostile crowd, the old man protested helplessly:

"We know what you have had to suffer, boys. . . ."

But Taloche would not listen; he had begun to sob:

"Do we look wounded? It would show on us, wouldn't it? We're not wounded, we're a bunch of wash-outs."

The crowd had swelled, and was growing restive:

"Poor fellow!"

"What's up?"

"This swine insulted one of the wounded."

"Shame on him!"

Taloche was bellowing now like a baby cutting its teeth:

"I am not wounded, do you hear? Now are you satisfied? Nothing on my arms, nothing on my legs. Go ahead: spit on me!"

Shaken with pity, the crowd pictured unseen and horrible body wounds. Those in the front ranks explained to the newcomers:

"A traitor spit on one of the wounded!"

"Throw him in the river!"

"Kill him!"

An urchin slipped behind the little old man and

knocked off his hat; a buxom lady, with tears rolling down her cheeks, kissed Taloche; and, supporting him under both arm-pits, we dragged him back to the car, followed by a deferential retinue, his pockets bursting, his head crowned with flowers like a conquering toreador, and his legs collapsing under him from drunkenness.

Tears gleamed in many eyes, and as Taloche muttered obstinately: "I am not wounded! It would show on me, wouldn't it? I am not wounded!"—grave voices, husky with feeling, murmured:

"Don't try to talk, it will tire you."

The train pulled out, carrying us towards Paris, and Taloche, propping his head on the sergeant's knees, reaffirmed the purity of his conscience:

"I don't care—no man should say he is wounded when he is not!"

The next day I wandered about the barracks like Achilles under the olive trees. Planes no longer flecked the sky, no shells burst, and houses stood intact; but I was still aware of a faint scent of the unknown, and of danger, like the salty taste that is left on one's lips after a voyage at sea. The memory of fear is a sensual delight.

Chapter 4

EXCEPT for the veneer of a military appearance, the ancient barracks known as Latour-Maubourg, in the early days of the war, was nothing more than a vast employment agency. There was never any question of army drill; we casuals who had been assembled there merely waited, from day to day and month to month, to be despatched elsewhere.

Meanwhile we strolled about the courtyard, preoccupied by the details of our future.

"I hope I get an assignment where I can have Sundays and evenings off."

"My ideal would be to be attached to some officer who wasn't too strong on discipline . . . nor a fanatic about uniforms."

Grave gentlemen of fifty and distinguished officers of the Academy were to be heard crowing like children:

"Better than I ever hoped for, old man! I sweep out the office, empty the waste-baskets, and the rest of the time wait for somebody to ring for me."

"But you should see me! I seal envelopes, fold mail, and file official orders according to date. You couldn't ask for a softer job."

During one whole week, a well-known journalist pulled wires for a choice assignment; but an influential broker was already in the field. The work consisted in sorting out old shirts at the quartermaster warehouse. The first evening, the broker gave a dinner, of eleven places, at the Café de Paris, to all the non-commissioned officers of the warehouse. The next day, each of the eleven, as well as an adjutant whom the broker had forgotten, received two tickets for orchestra seats at the Olympia, with the compliments of the journalist. On the third day, the quartermaster offices and warehouse were redolent with fine Havana cigars. The fourth, Adjutant X.'s friends learned with surprise that his little friend in one of the big department stores had been given a part in the cast at the Théâtre des Arts. The fifth, after a telephone call to the Ministry of Commerce, the broker was summoned to the commandant's office and placed in charge of the worn-out shirts; but a quarter of an hour later, a telephone communication from the Ministry of Public Education re-opened the whole case. At this point the commandant ordered a thorough investigation, as a result of which it was announced that "in

view of the great quantity of worn-out shirts to be sorted in the warehouse, two men would be assigned in the future to this task."

For many weeks we watched a famous author, whose specialty had been patriotic scenes and a grand style, trotting out to hold the doors of automobiles for officers, at the entrance to the Commissariat, and keeping the arriving and departing cars in line. Although on rainy days he lacked the red umbrella of his trade, this illustrious doorman would no doubt have collected good tips had not his clients been intimidated by his rosette of the Legion of Honor.

As for myself, I enjoyed the purely nominal rôle of orderly *in partibus* in the commandant's office. Everything that had not been specified as someone else's duty was, by definition, mine: but as a matter of fact, the glory of this title masked only a dreary and dangerous unemployment, the precursor of some distant assignment. A hundred of us had been herded together in a gloomy refectory, like the nobles of the old regime awaiting their turn at the guillotine during the Revolution. And from time to time, a corporal with the air of a turnkey opened the door and held up a list in his hand.

"Five men for Angoulême!"

At this summons, we crowded back into the shadows

in dismay. The corporal selected his victims among the most visible in the front ranks, led them off, unmoved by their cries, and they were never seen again.

At last, one evening, I was ordered to report the next morning at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I passed the night in speculation: had my recent expedition brought me into notice? What task was I to be entrusted with? Would I display sufficient tact? . . . The next day I discovered, and with no stirrings of pride, the sort of mission for which I was judged competent: together with four others, and under the high command of the porter at the Ministry, I was to deliver the diplomatic mail, on bicycle, to the porters of the embassies. It is true that, for my consolation, the porters wore many more stripes on their caps than even colonels can usually boast. . . .

I have since learned that the papers entrusted to us were not of the sort that determine the fate of Europe, but I confess that on that first morning I believed in my mission. It fell to my lot to deliver a yellow envelope to the Rumanian Legation, which was located near the avenue Marceau. As the porter at the Ministry handed it to me, he gave me a sharp look, and uttered the significant words:

"Without delay."

Looking him in the eyes, I answered simply, although somewhat moved:

"I understand."

Indeed I had understood: what would the plans of the great come to without the zeal of the obscure?—Thought without action?—To serve is to collaborate.—I tucked the envelope between my shirt and my vest. Since this letter must be delivered, it should be delivered, whatever happened—and without delay, that I would swear.

Oh, I did not fail to take precautions! For all that I could tell, someone who had been informed of the contents of this envelope and its importance, might be lying in ambush, ready for desperate measures. On leaving the Ministry, I turned abruptly to the right: such naïveté as riding direct to the avenue Marceau might be well enough for others. But the man who followed me would have to travel. At full speed, I pedalled down the boulevard Saint-Germain, then up the boulevard Saint-Michel and the avenue de l'Observatoire. By this time I was already panting over the handle bars with exhaustion, but I mustered strength enough to come down again towards Notre-Dame by the rue Saint-Jacques. At the rue de Rivoli, I decided that it was time to strike for my objective and, to assure myself that I could do so in

safety, I turned about on my saddle, lifting my right hand from the handle bars; at the same moment a cry of horror and pity went up from the sidewalk. . . . I regained consciousness in a drug store, where I discovered that my knees were scraped, the seat of my trousers torn and muddy, and my cheek bleeding. Lifting one hand painfully, I felt for the envelope, which was still in my bosom; and propped on a chair I caught my breath, while the crowd, finding that I was not injured, drifted away. Presently, bandaged, brushed off, sewed up, and modestly drawing the shreds of my trousers together, I paid the druggist and hailed a taxi; my bicycle had been reduced to an epileptic mass of iron, which would never see service again.

"Avenue Marceau, driver, as fast as you can make it."

In the cab I assuaged my physical pain in the bitterness of moral distress.

"A hundred and ten francs for the bicycle, eight francs for the druggist, ten francs for my torn trousers, and the taxi."

But that could not be helped: duty was duty; and dismayed at the loss of time, I leaned forward.

"Step on it, driver. I'll make it worth your while."

At last I reached the Legation. My legs stiff, I presented myself before the porter, like a statue of some ancient

knight, and held out the precious yellow envelope, oblivious of my appearance and the blood that I had spilled. A humble Michael Strogoff, I had accomplished my task, I had served my country, and nothing else mattered. I asked for the usual receipt, but the porter smiled and gave me a wink:

"Never mind. I know what it is."

This was no reason for neglecting to give me a receipt. In diplomacy, any carelessness may have serious consequences. I insisted.

"Never mind, I tell you. It's for me, I was expecting it."

He showed me a tiny cross in one corner of the envelope, ran his finger under the flap, and poking his head inside the door of his quarters, called out:

"Loulou, the gentleman at the Ministry sent us the tickets for the Mayol revue!"

This lesson was enough for me; with my torn trousers vanished any illusions I might have had concerning the rôle I was to play in the foreign policy of my country, and for a long time I ceased to consider the bicycle a means of transportation.

I bought a new one, it is true; but each morning, after receiving my batch of mail, I led the bicycle by the ear to a restaurant in the rue de Bourgogne, and in the evening, when my errands were done, I stopped there for

it before returning to the Ministry. I had paid dearly enough for my peace of mind to hope that it would last indefinitely. But, alas, within a few days a scandal broke out which brought disgrace on all the bicycle orderlies of the Ministry.

One of our number, in civilian life, was the inventor of a shoe-polish. He reported for duty each morning, his pockets bulging with little boxes, which he distributed to all the employees and guards. His history, I admit, was touching: the Orville Wright of shoe-polish, he had squandered his wife's dowry and his children's patrimony on his experiments. The war had obscured his discovery, and for lack of capital he was carrying on his manufacturing in the family: his wife melted the wax, and the children, when they came in from school, filled the sample boxes. His first glance each morning was at our shoes. He shrugged his shoulders and, disregarding my protests, led me off towards the garage.

"You'll see."

Extracting a brush, a rag, and a little box from his pockets, he carefully, lovingly, polished one shoe, rubbing up the eyelets and caressing the instep; then, his work done, he rested one hand on his brow and gazed at the gleaming leather as though it had been a treasured bit of ceramics.

With glowing eyes, he placed my feet together, confronting the shoe he had polished with the other.

"Look at the difference, old man, look at the difference!"

It was dazzling indeed; but as I never dared ask him to do the other shoe, which wore a gray and humiliated aspect beside its companion, I gave the impression, all the rest of the day, of a man who, by some freak of avarice, was replacing his worn shoes one at a time. It was in vain, in my efforts to free myself from this disgrace, that I bought a box of polish from him as large as a phonograph record: I polished for hours, but the shoe he had not done kept its sad appearance of a poor relation. I suspect, in fact, that the secret of his discovery lay in a few drops of his own spittle, and that to be perfectly honest he should have supplied a vial of it with each box of polish.

I might eventually have asked him for some, had we not both been ordered to report one evening to the lieutenant in charge of the mail. A pile of envelopes had been stacked on the desk before him; I was questioned first.

"Do you deliver your mail regularly?"

A letter to the Hondurian consul had been lying in my pocket for ten days, awaiting an occasion when I should

happen to be in his neighbourhood, which was nearly as remote as his country; but this was not the time to remember that.

"Yes sir, regularly."

"You have never done any errands for anyone else?"

Several days before, the inventor had asked me to leave an envelope, on my way by, at the Russian Embassy and one at the Greek Legation. I mentioned this.

"Do you know what was in those envelopes?"

I flushed under the insult:

"They were sealed, sir!"

The inventor stepped forward. Before he had spoken a word, I scented the presence of some embarrassing secret in the room and felt that a catastrophe was imminent.

"It was for the export trade, sir."

The poor devil had had a large number of handsome cards engraved, on which a spaniel with uplifted paw held out a box of shoe-polish in its mouth. And he had methodically flooded the embassies with these announcements, slipping his envelopes into the official mail. In a single fortnight our government had informed all the great powers, and smaller nations, of the excellence of Spaniel Polish, together with wholesale and retail prices, and offers to fill all orders received. This amazing adver-

tising had circulated until now without meeting any check; but, on the evening before, an obsequious letter had arrived at the Ministry from the plenipotentiary of a third-rate South American country, announcing that he had taken cognizance, on behalf of his government, of the existence of an official shoe-polish of the French Republic. The Minister's secretary had at once telephoned to the secretary of the Premier, who had telephoned to the Minister of Commerce, and a swift investigation had revealed that there was no accredited power to which Spaniel Polish had not gallantly offered its services.

This was the end of our duties. The resulting scandal depreciated our value and brought about a prætorian revolution in favor of the local police, who thenceforth delivered all mail. Our functions were reduced to our mere presence. We were strictly forbidden to do anything, but the slightest absence on our part was severely punished. We sought to find solace in books, but there were still four of us, and however much each one wished to read, it never happened that we all wished to do so at the same moment. Invariably one of us grew disgusted at watching the others read and, reverting to the habits of his earliest boyhood, surpassed himself in practical jokes so puerile that they would have bored a

child of five. Each man had his own specialty: a stout, bearded banker of fifty used to leap over the boxes and land on our shoulders, shouting, "Beware of the jaguar!" Another, who was a teacher in a prominent school in Paris, was a master at making spit-balls. As for the third, a manufacturer employing eight hundred workmen, I shall say nothing, for the sake of his reputation, about his specialty.

Thus our days passed, and we might have gone on indefinitely in this way, had it not been for the manufacturer. May shame and misfortune overtake him! May his descendents wither under a curse! May his favorite dog have hydrophobia, his cat strew kittens in his best arm-chair, and his mistress deceive him!

One morning, when he arrived, his expression seemed no more wicked than usual, and his handshake no less cordial. Yet it had been far better for us that morning had he been run over by a street car or a taxi. He drew a pack of cards from his pocket and, with a smile, said simply: "I brought these along."

"Pooh!" said the banker.

"There's not much fun in cards," remarked the schoolteacher.

"What a bore!" I cried.

"I know," admitted the manufacturer.

We sat down automatically, fingering the cards. Presently, the teacher began to shuffle absent-mindedly; and before I had thought what I was doing, I cut the pack.

"A game from time to time . . ." confessed the banker.

"Just one game . . ." put in the teacher.

". . . from time to time," I echoed.

"To break the monotony," added the manufacturer.

"Bridge?" suggested the teacher.

"Bridge," said the banker.

"Bridge goes," I agreed.

"Just as you wish," said the manufacturer.

And from that hour, all joy in living was extinguished for the four slaves that we became; intelligence flickered out; ambition, love, faith, tottered. We ceased to be men with families and a Fatherland. At eight in the morning, the first to arrive dusted off the box, the second laid out the cards, the third produced a score-card, and the fourth entered:

"Good morning. Whose deal is it?"

With taut faces and absorbed eyes, we played in silence; the first word spoken, aside from the technical phrases of the game, was:

"Noon! Let's go to lunch."

But our palates had grown indifferent, our stomachs inert; and we munched whatever was set before us.

". . . If I had finessed that club the other way . . ."

". . . But my singleton ace of hearts was what set you . . ."

". . . It would have gone better for us in no trump . . ."

The waiter was at our side.

"What will you have for dessert, gentlemen?"

"No dessert. Four coffees, and a pack of cards, please."

By six o'clock we had played twenty rubbers, and lost a franc or won ten sous.

The next morning, at eight o'clock, the first one to arrive dusted off the box. . . .

In the course of time, we came to look on the cards with disgust, with horror, with hatred. They were draining our lives: in the subway, or while calling on friends, I meditated different bids and pondered my sins of strategy; at night, in bed, I annotated my copy of *A Guide to Bridge* before falling asleep. But neither disgust, nor horror, nor hatred, had any effect on us; our souls were drugged. One morning, having arrived first, I was stirred to revolt: I hid the cards under the fire-extinguisher, and waited. The others appeared, but at

the news that the cards were lost neither disappointment nor relief passed across their depressed faces.

"We can't sit around doing nothing, though," grumbled the manufacturer.

"No," agreed the schoolteacher.

"Well?" asked the banker.

I pretended to search about, and in a few moments produced the cards from their place under the fire-extinguisher. As the first hand was being dealt, the teacher murmured:

"What a pity that you found them!"

"My God, yes!" echoed the rest; but I read clearly in their eyes that each one had been on the point of scurrying to the tobacco shop on the corner for another pack.

I felt now that my whole life was threatened; only a supreme effort could save me. It would take heroism to do it, and I realized bitterly that bridge was no school for developing heroism. I strove to invoke the recollection of my hours of bravery at Rheims and, in spite of my moral deterioration, this memory was still, thank God, a sensual delight. Although incapacitated for the pursuit of danger as a vocation, I nevertheless experienced a certain nostalgia for it; and in the intervals between making a misdeal and cutting out of turn, I appealed silently to the god of great disasters to deliver me.

One morning a dusty automobile, low-slung and panting like a toad, rolled into the courtyard of the Ministry and drew up before the door. At the wheel was a Belgian soldier; beside him sat another, both armed with carbines. Before the car had come to a full stop, a civilian jumped out, and I recognized an attaché of the Belgian Legation, whom I knew slightly. He waved to me and, dropping my cards, I hurried towards him.

"Are you going away?"

"Yes, this afternoon, at three o'clock."

"Where?"

"To Antwerp."

This was in October. At that time Antwerp was still resisting, under King Albert's orders; but the city was already locked in the vice of the enemy's lines.

"You will never get through!" I exclaimed.

The attaché smiled.

"I'll have to."

He explained that two French soldiers were to be sent with him. He would drive by automobile as far as possible towards Ostend, on the lookout for an opening in the German lines, which he would then cross at top speed. Failing to find any opening, he would try to get around by sea. He poked one finger into a hole in the side of his car.

"It won't be this car's first trip. I have already gone through twice. But the last time it was a close shave. I lost one man and the car stopped thirteen bullets."

I studied his face while he was speaking. And I remembered meeting him one evening at a friend's house, when his features had been drawn with anxiety. We were dining there together; during the whole meal he had seemed listless, taciturn, and without appetite. As we were drinking our coffee, I had asked him:

"Are you worried about something?"

He had sighed and, twisting his coffee cup in the saucer:

"I have to have two teeth pulled in the morning. I dread it."

This memory encouraged me. My own dentist never pulled teeth: he merely removed them. His supple fingers could tame the shyest molars; his cruel forceps were hidden in his sleeve; and in his office one breathed an atmosphere of gentleness.

"Now, here is a tooth that we are going to try to save," he would tell you.

He would finger it, caress it, talk to it, and finally present it to you in his pincers.

"You can see for yourself that it was hopeless. You may spit now; it's all over. . . ."

Surely I could not be less brave than a man who was terrified by his dentist. I repressed the disturbing memory that I had once insisted on chloroform for a cauterization.

"Will you take me with you?"

In a kindly tone he pointed out:

"It's dangerous, you know. . . . However, if you really want to go, be at the Legation at two o'clock."

And he added:

"Armed."

My escape from bridge was in sight!

Without waiting to ask permission—there was no time for that—I rushed from the Ministry to the barracks. Ten o'clock! I had only four hours left. In the tumult of my thoughts, I was vaguely aware of neglecting a few formalities, such as notifying the commandant that I was leaving and having absurd papers made out; but I was on my way to face the enemy, and that was all that mattered. I burst into the equipment warehouse.

"I am leaving this afternoon! Let me have a full outfit."

An aura must have glowed about my brow, and fire jetted from my eyes: electrified by my ardor, the orderly forgot the most elementary regulations of the service. It is true that he stammered: "Where is your order?"

But I replied in such impetuous tones, "Up there!"—that he did not stop to consider whether I meant the administrative offices on the second floor, or the God on high who inspired the prophets. The adjutant was not there: he may have stepped out for a drink, or Providence may have lured him away for my sake, I don't know which. Under my hypnotic glance, the orderly led me among the racks and shelves, announcing generously, like Aladdin's slave:

"Take what you want."

I raided the stocks: carbine, belt, bayonet, revolver, cartridge box—weapons of offense and defense. I carried away a sample of everything that pierces, bores, cuts, crushes, riddles, or annihilates. I stuffed cartridges in my pockets, in my vest, in my mail bag. I buckled a short spade securely at my side, and suspended a row of rockets from my belt.

The orderly voiced his admiration:

"You look like a one-man orchestra."

I handed him a silver franc, which was hardly the equivalent of one hundred-thousandth of the weight of metal that I was carrying off, and staggered towards a taxi. There was still a painful but necessary half hour to be undergone at home: the farewells. I explained breathlessly:

"I am leaving!—for Antwerp—we are going to cross the lines—very important—by automobile—"

My sister's sobs, my mother's tears, my father's grave looks found my heart of flint.

"But you are in the S. O. S!"

"I am a soldier. Fix me some sandwiches, will you? I am leaving in three hours."

I avoided discussing the details of my mission, and particularly refrained from mentioning that I was going as a volunteer: there are some things that parents will never understand. But I realized that my father, who was familiar with army matters, had not swallowed the story of my enterprise without some reservations.

"Who picked you out?"

I could hardly reply: "Destiny." And as it seemed best to brazen it out, I announced:

"The commandant."

My father was visibly disturbed.

"This is outrageous! You don't even know how to handle a revolver. . . ."

I shrugged my shoulders and, to prove that he was wrong, manipulated my rifle so skilfully that in two minutes I had jammed a cartridge and loosened the trigger-guard. I could only repeat helplessly:

"Wait a second! Here's the way it goes. . . ."

"This is murder!" exclaimed my father.

Finally he declared:

"I have an errand to do. I'll meet you in front of the Legation."

And I heard him tumbling down the stairs two at a time.

I took advantage of his absence to remind my distracted mother that money was always useful, and that it was the only weapon still missing from my arsenal. Emotions are happily devoid of calculation: all the pocketbooks in the house were emptied into my hands, and my sister surrendered an exquisite gold charm which I had been trying to coax from her for months.

I made my last farewells to all my friends by telephone, greedily snuffing up the incense of their good wishes and admiration. I even invited the most intimate of my friends to meet me in front of the Legation for a final embrace.

When the last words had been spoken, and the last details attended to, I left the house, shaking hands at the door with the other tenants and with the janitor.

At the entrance to the Legation, in the rue de Berry, a small group was already waiting for me: my friends

had come. One, more sentimental than the rest, carried a bouquet of flowers in his hand. To them I confessed the truth:

"I volunteered. . . . I thought it might be interesting."

The oldest of them looked troubled.

"What does your father think of this?"

"He thinks it's swell."

At two o'clock the Belgian car drove up. My friends saluted. The attaché stepped over to me, and greeted me with surprise.

"Hello! Did they let you come?"

"Why not?"

Evidently somewhat embarrassed, he murmured:

"Well, we'll make room for you somehow."

He disappeared into the Legation, and rejoining my friends, whose number was swelling momentarily, I gave them my version of the conversation:

"He was afraid I wouldn't be able to come."

It was now almost three o'clock, and I caught sight of my father a block away, hurrying towards us. My friends tactfully drew aside, happy spectators of the coming scene. For they were to learn that Greece and Rome had not been unique in heroic parents and sublime sacrifices; nor was it only in engravings from the days of Napoleon

that one could witness tragic farewells: those noble communions at the altar of the Fatherland. O Rome! O Sparta!

I advanced towards my father, the clank of my equipment heralding each step that I took. Now was the moment for him to open his arms; for me to throw myself into them—even at the risk of putting out one of his eyes. Would his voice fail him? Or, if he spoke, what words would he find to use? A simple phrase, perhaps, but one of lofty beauty:

"Go, my son, child of my own blood . . ."

The sacred benediction!

But he had no sooner come within hearing—in fact, within the hearing of all those around—than he bellowed:

"You little blockhead!"

I staggered in bewilderment.

Coming nearer, he roared again:

"You idiot!"

A cloud passed across my eyes; I had a distinct impression that I was breathing lead.

And in curt tones, my father concluded:

"You young ass!"

There was no treasure I owned that I would not gladly have given at that moment for news that all of my

friends, who had rushed to see me off, had just become the victims of a sudden and collective death.

My father pointed relentlessly to the little bouquet of flowers, which my sentimental friend had stuck in my cap.

"Take that off! If you knew how silly you look . . . !"

I removed it furtively, as if absent-mindedly, while scratching one ear.

"Come with me," ordered my father.

And in a voice charged with promise, he added:

"They are waiting for you."

Then, magnanimously:

"You may say good-bye to your friends."

May that wretched minute of limp handshakes, vague smiles, and diffident coughs, be credited to me as a century in purgatory!

Clanking along beside my father, I learned that he had driven furiously to the barracks and insisted on speaking to the commandant. On being admitted, he had overwhelmed that noble soldier with reproaches, accusing him of having violated every law of the state and of human decency, by sending into battle a man who could not even fit a cartridge into a rifle or unsheathe a bayonet. The commandant had protested his innocence, rung for his clerks, and summoned orderlies. The

Aladdin's slave had been brought before him, cross-examined, and rewarded with two weeks in the guardhouse for having equipped me without authority. Finally, the commandant had suggested to my father, as man to man:

"If he is leaving at three o'clock, you have just time to catch him and bring him back to me."

"But suppose he has already gone?" my father had groaned.

"Then he will be court-martialled for desertion."

For two thousand years the picture of the prodigal son has been associated in people's hearts with the tender emotions of the Biblical tale—and unreasonably so, it seems to me, for I can find nothing winning in that young man, whose repentance consisted merely in preferring fatted calf to swine husks. In fact, I have doubted the truth of that story ever since I once came home, at the age of six, after innocently running away for a few hours: on being restored to my father's house, my ears were boxed, my bottom well spanked, and in place of the symbolic calf I was treated to a feast of cod-liver oil.

It was the taste of this oil that, after twenty years, came back to me as we approached the barracks, and dissipated any illusion I might have had concerning the commandant's joy at my return.

Fortunately, brevity is the rule of military conversations. The commandant gazed at me in heavy silence: he was calculating the deficit into which my going would have plunged the warehouse. Then he rang for an orderly.

"Disarm this man."

While the orderly struggled, tearing his nails on buckles, and flourishing my weapons in every direction, a cold sweat began to break out on the back of my neck. The commandant, impatient to be rid of me, seized my carbine by the barrel and shook it as though he were uprooting an oak, bawling at me:

"Have you got it sewed to your shirt?"

Meanwhile, my father endeavored to slip my revolver over my shoulders by turning it like a roulette wheel.

I could not endure the sight of these two men, in the prime of their lives, innocently embracing death. Compassion overpowered pride in my soul, and I stammered my supreme confession:

"Be careful . . . I believe I loaded the rifle and carbine . . . and the revolver too."

My movements instantly became free, and I was given all the time I needed to extricate myself from my harness. In fact, I might have done so much quicker than I

did, had not the commandant cried out, each time one of my weapons lifted its nose:

"For God's sake, point that down!"

An orderly, who brought in some papers, left the door ajar into the hall. Heaven knows what preposterous story had already begun to circulate about me, but the hall was swarming with all those who had nothing to do at that hour in barracks—and there were many of them.

When the orderly went out, taking my panoply of arms back to the store-room, an eager buzzing of voices warned me of the success that I might expect when I appeared myself.

The commandant sighed:

"Obviously, you belong in an asylum."

I swallowed the insult.

"However, a couple of weeks in the guard-house can't do you any harm."

And, as if he had not been quite sure, he added:

". . . Can they?"

He seemed to be awaiting my personal opinion on this subject with the deepest solicitude. My father charitably offered his:

"Don't you think that is rather light, Commandant?"

Only too light indeed! At that moment I should have

welcomed with ecstasy any penalty of a definitive nature, such as deportation for life or permanent exile in some desert where the name of Antwerp had never been heard.

At the commandant's orders, the sergeant of the guard and two men, fully armed, took me into custody, and I was escorted with the usual ceremony to the disciplinary regions. The sergeant marched ahead, jingling his keys like an acolyte's bells. I walked behind him, sandwiched between my two guards; and behind me rose the long canticle of the spectators:

"What did he do?"

"Pipe the expression on his face!"

"It seems he almost knocked him down."

"Another bad egg."

Naturally I assumed an air of nonchalance and a complacent smile, to indicate that, absorbed in the joy of living, I had no suspicion of being surrounded by so many people, and that I was myself a spectator of the spectacle I provided. But in my heart I envied those murderers whom the State compassionately cloaks in black, which at least frees them from a useless pride and allows them to look unhappy if they wish.

By the time we reached the guard-house, my escort had assumed the proportions of a regiment in war stand-

ing. In the midst of a vast silence, the sergeant inserted a key, which must have weighed at least three pounds, into a lock, and pushed me ahead of him into a long room, austerely furnished with a plank fastened to the wall. Squatting on the floor by a candle stuck in the neck of a bottle, three shadows, hemmed in by a circle of saliva, which they carefully maintained, did not so much as turn their heads at my entrance. They were barely visible, in fact, through the cloud of cigarette smoke and the fumes of alcohol.

The sergeant of the guard tapped my pockets.

"You haven't any wine, tobacco, or matches, have you? They're forbidden here."

Through the folds of my uniform he fingered my pipe, a package of Maryland cigarettes, and a box of safety matches. Then he announced:

"All right, you're O. K. . . . But that's no reason for not offering me a cigarette."

On the point of leaving, one of my two guards whispered:

"If you want any wine, just rap twice at the bottom of the door."

The door slammed, and a moment later the lock squealed like a young pig. At last I was alone. But a final ordeal still awaited me. From the group of pariahs on

the floor, one of the shadows was now staring at me, the visor of his cap pulled down over his right eye and a stubby pipe clamped between his teeth; with horror I recognized the orderly who had equipped me in the warehouse. Was this ruffian about to invite me to take off my coat and settle the matter with my fists? Or—worse still—how many bottles of wine would he consider a reasonable ransom for his captivity? . . . But Aladdin's slave cheerfully flourished a handful of torn and greasy cards in the air, and shouted:

"Hurrah! Here comes a fourth for bridge!"

I was conquered. I picked up the hand that was dealt me and, consoled, appeased, tranquil in heart, and reconciled with fortune, I realized, as I looked over my cards, that I now held the true and only offensive and defensive weapons of the S. O. S.

Chapter 5

THE guard-house at Latour-Maubourg gave the impression less of a bastille than of a cellar for storing rotten potatoes. I have no idea who the designer of it was, but I should like to recommend his plans to all architects of model barracks. The most exquisite tact had determined the choice of its site: off the beaten track, yet close to the canteen, its inmates recovered from their shame in seclusion, and if the food was sometimes bad, at least there was plenty to drink. Since nothing is more depressing than the sight of walls to those that cannot pass them, each window was protected by an ingenious network of slats, through which the light of heaven trickled down as if into a funnel, and which kept the vain tribulations of the world from disturbing the meditation of the captives. Holes the size of one's fist, whittled out with all the patience of long imprisonments, had gradually destroyed the efficacy of these slats; but they still provided excellent hiding-places for food and liquors, and served as discreet pipe racks.

Ten men armed with a battering-ram could not have broken down the massive oak door, which was rimmed with strips of iron, reinforced with iron plates, and studded with iron spikes. Yet a thread, skilfully inserted at the right point, would release the huge cast-iron latch that held the lock. As for the lock itself, it was as broad as a cuirass, and it took a three-pound key to open it. But unfortunately the gigantic double bolt sank loosely into a whitish powder of crumbling plaster; and yielded to the most timid solicitations with the sole of a shoe.

In revealing these details, I am not forgetting those misguided soldiers who at this moment may be undergoing a remorse cure behind the bars of Latour-Maubourg. The sergeants of the guard know better than anyone else the state of affairs. Their key-ring, in fact, is largely a symbol, which in my day usually hung on a nail in the guard-room. At meal times the sergeant of the guard would stroll over to our quarters, his hands in his pockets, and pushing the door open with one knee, shout:

"Well, are you going to stay in there all day?"

The sleeping accommodations, on the other hand, had none of the gracious features of the windows and the door. Why this was so I cannot imagine, unless it was to provide an appropriate punishment for those that had

sinned by sleeping out of barracks. There were no beds, of course: the necessities of local colour would hardly have permitted that; but neither was there any straw. A gaunt rack of planks, with a funereal resemblance to the inclined marble slabs in the morgue, stretched across the twilight of the room, clamped to the walls as if it were feared that, on leaving, the prisoners might carry off such delectable couches. A convenient little rim did what it could to keep one's feet from slipping off, and was useful, no doubt, in maintaining one's head at the height of the solid oak bolster.

The walls were at once a museum and a library. Except for a few cries of hatred, carved with the blade of a knife, and a few mathematical calculations concerning the expiration of sentences, these walls bore witness to a tender inspiration. Poor devils, unable to sleep on such hard beds, had sought consolation for their continence and their hours of wakefulness in scrawling lapidary phrases, illustrated with trophies of Babylonian dimensions and symbols to have put to shame the most literary of outhouses. The soldiers who traced those drawings may have been mistaken as to their powers, but at least they knew perfectly what they desired.

Had the usual terms of imprisonment not been ridiculously short—for after all, when a man is given a week

for upsetting his mess-kit on the stairs, it would not be much more out of proportion to give him two years—had the sentences, as I say, not expired so quickly, what a marvellous school of entomologists this might have become! For it was only soldiers that found this place a jail. Insects discovered a flourishing jungle for their delight under the erysipelas of the walls and the smallpox of the planks. What a spectacle it was, at nightfall, to watch the great herds of bugs crawling down towards us! What frolics were indulged in by the fleas! Many a night I lay awake to witness the tragic loves of the louse and the spider, so often sung by the poets, or the solitary promenade of the cockroach with his black and velvety back, like an aged sexton.

There were four of us there to enjoy a few days of rest, which we had earned in varying ways, but of which we were all equally determined to savor the fullest advantages, since we all bore its shame.

The day began early with a careful reading of the newspapers, which a well trained orderly slipped under our door. He was followed a few minutes later by another orderly, this time from the canteen, who brought four steaming cups of coffee. At reasonable intervals the sergeant of the guard paid us a visit, seldom failing, as he entered, to recite the ritualistic words:

". . . Reeks like a pig-pen in here—ought to be swept out. . . ."

It was rarely that we deigned to understand, on the first call, that an order was implied in this "ought." But the redoubtable spectre of the adjutant of the guard, cleverly evoked by the sergeant, stimulated our zeal, and we consented to undertake what was officially referred to as the "daily cleaning of the premises." In single file we marched to the guard-room, where a broom with barely enough straw left to furnish a toothbrush, a preserve pail so old that it began to sprinkle the floor the moment it was filled, and a three-ton truck in the form of a wheelbarrow, were distrustfully committed into our care. We rattled these precious instruments noisily up and down our refuge two or three times and then, bracing the wheelbarrow solidly against the door, and plugging up the key-hole with the broom, brought out a pack of cards.

At ten o'clock the sergeant appeared.

"How long does it take you to clean up in here?"

"We're doing a thorough job today, Sarge."

For that matter, we did a thorough job every day. With an accusing finger, the sergeant pointed out the sprawling smears of saliva, like constellations, on the stone pavement.

"How about those?"

"That's where we sprinkled."

And in single file we returned the pail, the broom, and the wheelbarrow to the guard-house. There was always an orderly to complain:

"They've been sweeping like fools again! They're going to ruin this broom if somebody doesn't stop them!"

This done, we were not allowed to go back to our retreat.

"Exercise, now," announced the sergeant. And, victims of a century-old custom, we began circling around the courtyard, one behind another, like snails after the rain. In former days, this exercise was taken with a pack on your back, a rifle over your shoulder, and leggings strapped on your calves. By shutting your eyes, it was at least possible to find some exhilaration in imagining that you were going somewhere. But milder customs, in lightening our load, had weakened the character of the exercise itself; in denim and slippers, we looked more like a column of sheep suffering from an incurable beri-beri.

The afternoons were more interesting: then we carried on a labor of the greatest significance, although within the reach of the feeblest intellects. This consisted in gathering up the dead leaves around the barracks

with the familiar broom and loading them on the familiar truck.

The very first day, I announced:

"I can drive."

And, boldly seizing the handles of the wheelbarrow, I trundled it off at a gallop towards the shade of a tall plane tree hidden behind the kitchens. There, with my back comfortably supported, my eyes fixed on the sky, and my legs stretched out, I speculated at my leisure as to whether the wheelbarrow and the chaise-longue had not, like man and the monkeys, once possessed a common ancestor.

Towards dusk my brothers in captivity appeared, each one holding out a pinch of leaves at arm's length and in the tips of his fingers, as though he were carrying a venomous insect. The dead leaves they had collected, moreover, were all of the healthiest green imaginable, for the excellent reason that it is easier to lift one's arms than to bend one's legs.

Dinner, which was served in the strictest privacy, was usually admirable, thanks to the noble conscience of the cooks, for whom a soldier suffering punishment was not infrequently a hero and always a victim.

Finally, as night fell, we clambered up to the windows to watch our captors depart: first the commandant

strolled placidly away, which was a signal for the lieutenants to dash out, followed at a prudent distance by the adjutants. Then the sergeant of the guard began his nonchalant pacing back and forth in front of the guard-house. He was not leaving, he was merely stretching his legs outside the gate, that was all. His hands behind his back, his head sunk in meditation, he took two steps to the left, and two back; then three to the right, and three back; paused a moment, then four to the left. Again he returned, but this time his reverie carried him a full dozen steps to the right, and back to the left as far as the corner of the street. What! So far without realizing it? He lifted his eyes, glanced towards the guard-house, smiled at his own distraction, leaned nonchalantly against the wall . . . rotated on his shoulders, and, now that he had stretched his legs, ran to the nearest bus stop. It would take a clever man to find him again before reveille.

As soon as he was out of sight, the pathetic hour set in. My three comrades, who all day had appeared to be in a good mood, undisturbed by any cares, were now tormented with anxiety. They yammered for the guard-house sergeant, who ambled in, his thumbs stuck in his cartridge belt, and his kepi held by the chin-strap like a baby's cap.

"Well, what's the matter now?"

Each one in turn led him aside.

"It's this way, Sergeant, my wife is in labor. And there's nobody at the house except the janitor's wife, and she's got a grudge against us. Besides, I live just around the corner from here."

"Sergeant, my children will be coming home in a few minutes, and the poor kids won't find anything there to eat. Two days they've been without food, Sergeant."

The sergeant nodded his head and tramped towards the door, followed briskly by the two victims of fate. The third stopped him. He was a gangling, pallid youth, who wore his kepi like a cap and a cigarette butt in one corner of his mouth as a sort of beauty patch.

"Listen, Sergeant, my father is sick. They took him to the hospital. And I told my little sister to stop by tonight and give me the news. You know what a man's father means to him. You'll let her come in, won't you?"

And he added modestly:

"But don't try any rough stuff on her, Sarge. She's a good girl."

Moved by this appeal, the sergeant gave his permission for the visit. A quarter of an hour later, preceded by an irreverent orderly, the good little sister appeared, her

hair screwed up on top of her head in a greasy knot, her lips scarlet, her eyes set in black rims of kohl, her dress cut down to her breasts, her skirt up to her knees, and one corner of a napkin escaping from her handbag. If that girl had ever come out of a hospital, it had not been on someone else's account. She squatted on the edge of the planks and delivered a resounding kiss on the prisoner's fraternal lips. I tiptoed discreetly towards the door, abandoning the skeleton of planks to their confidences. But I was still near enough to hear the tinkling of a handful of small money and explanations in a rasping voice:

"I told him five francs . . . but that big skinny Mélie charges only two . . . and that ain't fair . . ."

The voices ceased. . . . I went a little farther (and so did they, I believe).

At a quarter to nine, the two fathers of families reappeared, obviously relieved of their worries; and the little sister withdrew, demurely lowering her eyes as she passed by the guard-room.

In this simple, honest life, I was achieving a gradual regeneration from my grievous fault, when at dawn on the sixth day a heavy step echoed in the corridor. It could not be the orderly from the canteen, who would not dare disturb us at such an hour. . . . The official

keys scraped in the lock. The commandant himself appeared and closed the door behind him.

"Do you still want to go to Antwerp?"

With a shake of the head I abjured all my past errors.

But he persisted:

"So you have learned your lesson, have you?"

To tell the truth, I had begun reading the *Memoirs of the Countess de Boigne* the day before, and it would have taken three more afternoons in the wheelbarrow to finish them. But I saw from his kindly eyes that he reproached me for having driven him to severity, and that he was now beseeching me to help him out of the situation. With a silent farewell to the plane tree behind the kitchen and the Countess de Boigne, I answered humbly:

"Yes sir, I've learned my lesson."

At this moment, there was a rustle under the door, and a generous assortment of the morning papers spread miraculously over the floor at the commandant's feet. But at the cost of a real effort, he succeeded in not seeing them.

"Very well," he told me, "you are free."

On his way out, he just missed diving into the tray that the orderly from the canteen was carrying before him. The commandant roared down the poor fellow's stammerings:

"I didn't ask you for any explanations, did I? I can see that it is for these gent——"

After this episode I ceased to cool my heels at Latour-Maubourg. Either to spare himself the pain of punishing me any further, or to compensate for the horrors of my captivity, the commandant placed me at the disposal of the Paris Bureau of Food Distribution, which had requisitioned a clerk that could speak English. There I was awaited like the Messiah. The assistant director showed me a pile of papers as high as his desk.

"We want you to translate all of that for us."

Estimating the height of the pile, I calculated that by beginning at once, and working twelve hours a day, I would have enough to keep me busy for seven or eight years. The assistant director added:

"Every two weeks, you can bring me what you have translated."

Thereupon I was solemnly installed in a little office, where there was barely enough space for my table after the Boy Scouts, like obliging gnomes, had brought in the mountain of papers and another pile of clean white pages for me to soil.

I devoted my first days to establishing useful relations with the janitor and his wife, and among the orderlies.

I also made considerable progress in the *Memoirs of the Countess de Boigne*. Finally, on the thirteenth day of the first fortnight, I spread out a large sheaf of papers on my table. The hour that followed will always remain in my memory as one of the sweetest of my life: except for a few figures, these thousands of food charts, with their different headings and varying colors, all bore the same text.

The next day, I presented myself once more at the assistant director's, with an impressive bundle of completed sheets.

"Ah, ha! I see you've been digging into it!"

I placed my papers boldly on his desk, but he pushed them aside with a graceful hand.

"No, no, that's for the Ministry. When you have done all of it, we will send the originals and the translations over together. You will push ahead as fast as you can, won't you?"

"Certainly, sir."

Returning to my office, I selected a few sheets of the finest stiff white paper, and began drafting the synopsis and list of characters for a play in five acts and in verse, which I was meditating.

Enchanted fortnights passed in this way.

Every other Saturday, I appeared regularly with my

bundle of translations, copied at top speed in a large and sprawling handwriting. Slowly but surely the pile was rising.

From time to time I met the assistant director in the corridor.

"Well, young man, how are you coming along? They are getting impatient over at the Ministry."

But beyond this he never insisted.

Wealthy and worldly, he had been one of those munificent bourgeois who from time to time grow bored or curious and, without giving up their subscriptions to the *Figaro* and *Variétés,* sail away to represent Paris, rather than France, in the Orient. Stationed somewhere inland from Singapore, they take pride in receiving the latest necktie and the latest book before the provinces at home have heard of them. Having sampled all the thrills of life in his youth, he had acquired both a profound intelligence and a taste for frivolity. For the moment, he occupied the post to which he had been appointed as one passes through a dreary corridor that leads to nobler vistas; and profited by this interim to renew his relations in official antechambers and delectable boudoirs. In the morning, he arrived briskly at his office, though late, saluting his officers and orderlies with the same glacial courtesy. None could flatter himself that he had held

the assistant director's glance, which passed through his subordinates with no more refraction than if they had been a pane of glass. His great-coat still over his shoulders, he rang for all his heads of departments at once, and in five minutes had laid out their work and finished his own for the day. The rest of the time, his life was spent elsewhere, in some mysterious nexus of the telephone system. At whatever hour of the day one entered his office, he was to be found, receiver at his ear, with the vague and happy smile of a child listening to the echo of the sea in a shell, and murmuring endearments:

"At the Café de Paris? . . . If you like . . . only don't be late. . . ."

Occasionally, in the afternoon, a lady of dainty features, a slim ankle, and the faintest of perfumes, called at the office and asked in a ravishing voice:

"May I see the assistant director in charge of the distribution of flour? I am the baker's wife from the rue Lepic."

On such afternoons, the heads of departments might desert their offices with little danger.

But, alas, the hostile fate that had pursued me could not allow such a marvellous existence to last. A reorganization of the departments tore me from this charming assistant director, and placed me under the

orders of a civilian bureaucrat, as crabbed and sly as a peasant, as hard-working as a bull, and as stupid as an ox. This benighted creature, who in his better days had been a clerk in the City Hall, lived under the superstition that his presence stimulated our energies and bolstered up our faltering spirits. My little private office was a thorn in his side. Twenty times a day he charged my door, thrusting his head in like a cannon-ball. He should at least have given me credit for the miracle that he always found me absorbed in the arid translation of an English food chart. For I had devised a system of writing my scenes, line by line, on numbered strips of paper, which I dropped, as soon as each was finished, into the waste-basket. Yet for some reason I failed to inspire confidence in him. Distracted at being unable to control the intensity of my labors, he barked:

"Never you mind! I'll get you yet!"

He slammed the door, and re-opened it immediately:

"Do you understand? I'll get you yet!"

At intervals he sent me off on an errand in some other part of the city. On my return I found all of my papers jumbled and shuffled from top to bottom; but it never occurred to him to look in the waste-basket.

Then there were days when butter would not melt in his mouth. Planting himself like a paper-weight on one

corner of my table, he questioned me with a fatherly benevolence:

"What did you do before the war?"

"I was a student, sir."

"Well, well, that's interesting. . . . They tell me you used to do a little writing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Indeed! I suppose you will be a famous man some day."

"I hardly expect so, sir."

"Yes, you will. I have a very good impression of you. I may seem a trifle severe, but you understand . . ."

"Certainly, sir."

"I should like to read something you have written."

"You are too kind, sir."

"No, no. . . . By the way . . ."

He conjured up a smile that just escaped being a grimace.

". . . by the way, you are not writing anything at present, are you?"

"How could I, sir, with all this work to do . . . ?"

"To be sure! To be sure!"

The smile fell, and he burst out:

"Well, I'll get you yet, just the same! You may not think so, but I will!"

Poor man, I must have taken years off his life.

One morning I learned that he had asked permission to attend a wedding. Having just finished my second act, I decided to take advantage of his absence to recopy it on the finest official paper. I set to work, bent over my table, and had reached the hundred and sixtieth verse when I heard a voice over my shoulder murmur sweetly:

"Didn't I tell you I'd get you?"

He was in morning-coat and white gloves, as if to give greater solemnity to this supreme moment of his life. Drawing off the right glove, so as not to soil its dazzling purity with the disgrace of his capture, he took possession of my manuscript.

"And on official paper, sir! Official paper of the government!"

My executioner flipped over the pages feverishly. At the third page, a horrible suspicion budded in him:

"Why . . . why . . . this is poetry . . . ?"

And, with an appealing glance towards the filing cabinets, as if to call the portraits of his ancestors to witness, he sighed:

"Poetry! . . . Follow me, young man."

Barely pausing to knock at the door, he led me into the office of the assistant director, who hung up the receiver reluctantly.

"What's the trouble now?"

With a sweeping gesture, my chief pointed to me, standing motionless and with downcast eyes. In his white tie and long coat, with the little sheaf of papers in his hand, he suggested a cabinet minister laying a cornerstone.

"What is the trouble? Listen to this, sir:

> ". . . But what had you to do
> In such a group, and with such gentry too?
> You should have stayed—as other nights we've known—
> To hunt the wolf in silk, and hunt alone.
> Why angle after fortune in the world
> When here good fortune lay securely curled?
> You are fair . . .

"That is how our interpreter spends his time, sir. And on official paper, you will observe."

The assistant director gazed through me meditatively. At that moment I would have given three sacks of flour to have heard that the baker's wife from the rue Lepic was waiting at the door. Obviously the assistant director could find no solution to this problem.

"Leave the papers on my table and go back to your offices, gentlemen. I will look into this."

My chief stammered:

"But you gave me permission, sir, to attend a wedding. . . ."

"You can attend it tomorrow. When you start something here, you must follow it through. . . ."

"But I am one of the witnesses, sir."

"You are a witness here also. You may go now. I am much obliged to you."

I returned to my office, savoring my chief's fury like a stick of candy after a purge. But in solitude I once more became the prey of the worst apprehensions. There was no telling where this affair might end. I had already chewed my nails to the quick when an orderly appeared and announced in the lugubrious tone of "Brother, prepare to die":

"The assistant director wants to see you."

"What sort of mood is he in?" I asked.

"None. He is telephoning."

My knock at the door would not have wounded a fly.

The arbiter of my fate, leaning back in his arm-chair, turned over the pages of the incriminating evidence slowly. At last he looked up:

"Ah! So you're there . . . ?"

He frowned, meditated, and suddenly hurled at me:

"If I were you, I would shorten that monologue of

Florestan's. It's well written, but it drags. Here, you might cut beginning with the line:

> ". . . And my fly? Gone with a butterfly.

"You see how that would relieve the monotony?"

He might have cut the whole monologue, and his relief would have been nothing compared with mine. He skipped a few pages.

"Ah! Here's a good bit:

> "Were I to lift this bolt, my prize
> Had bolted ere I . . .

"That'll go over! . . . But I think you ought to have a pistol shot when Florestan jumps out the window."

I agreed eagerly. A pistol shot? I would shoot off a cannon if he liked.

He tilted his head back thoughtfully.

"By the way . . . Have you anybody in mind for Isabelle's part?"

"I hadn't thought about that yet, sir."

His eyes half-closed, smiling to unseen angels, he murmured:

"We'll have to think about that. . . ."

Then, brushing away some enchanting vision with the back of his hand, he added:

"Meanwhile, I have to punish you. I don't see any way out of it, unless . . ."

He examined me carefully.

"You don't look at all well to me. If you feel ill, you had better report on the sick list."

He smiled blandly.

"In that way, one avoids any difficulties."

The audience was over. He handed me my manuscript.

"I shall see you again. You may go now."

Eleven o'clock was striking, and I took my place in the line that was forming to march to a nearby barracks for lunch. The assistant director had been right. By the time we had reached the rue Babylone, I was already suffering internal pains; and in the courtyard of the barracks they became so intolerable that I requested the sergeant to put me on the sick list. Whereupon, foreseeing that I might soon be placed on a restricted diet, I lunched with a hearty appetite.

Chapter 6

A SOLDIER may be as ignorant as he likes as to whether his heart is located on the left side or the right; he may even fail to distinguish between a muscle and a nerve; but what he must do, what is indispensable for him, is to know one disease—just one. But that one he must know as thoroughly as Widal or the Mayo brothers. He must be able, by innocently mentioning indirect and remote symptoms, to guide an attentive medical officer towards the expected diagnosis; or, by claiming definite and related pains, to alarm a distrustful one. Never, under any circumstances, must he speak the name of the disease that he has chosen: he has never heard its name before; he merely knows that his back hurts, or that his stomach is out of order; that he grows dizzy at times, that his food does not stay down, or that he suffers from sudden spasms of pain; but he is only a layman, you understand. And when the disease is named by the medical officer, it will usually create a good effect if the soldier appears dazed by the light that he himself

has just evoked. He must always remember that an army doctor knows a little about medicine, and consequently detests nothing more than an invalid who has any familiarity with the subject. On the other hand, if he inquires anxiously: "Is it serious, Doctor?"—he is almost certain to be rewarded with:

"No, but we had better keep an eye on it just the same. I am going to send you over to the infirmary."

He must also never, under any pretext, nor for any reason, speak to an army doctor about any civilian doctor. It would be safer to present a certificate from a medium or a fortune-teller.

On mature reflection, I decided to have a slight attack of enteritis, which would require only a few days of careful treatment, and with this settled I walked unhurriedly to the infirmary. As it was not the hour for the doctor's visit, I knew that I should find only a few unimportant male nurses there; which would give me until the next morning to correlate my memories on the subject of pathology and to prepare my diagnosis.

The infirmary was the disgrace of the barracks. Reason assures us that at some time it must have been new; but this is a tenet to be accepted with one's eyes shut. And even in its newness, it must have been built of old stones. During centuries the walls had soaked in filth,

like sponges, as high as a man could reach, until one administration, given to bold innovations, had attempted to whiten them with a layer of enamel. The walls had promptly begun to sweat through the fresh enamel and eat it away from the back as if afflicted with some incurable skin disease. The driest weather could not free them of a greasy film, which spread gently over one's fingers and smeared the back of one's coat. Even the kitchens were less foul.

One entered first into a vast and empty room: the waiting-room. Not entirely empty, however; heavy oak benches ran along the walls, worn smooth, like pebbles in the sea, from millions of pairs of breeches; Richelieu's guardsmen had no doubt thrown dice in this room while waiting to be bled. In the darkest corner, the benches stopped short in front of an enormous cast-iron garbage can, which every morning received the cotton from the bandages and the purges that had been spit out in secret.

Crouching nearby on the floor, which was eaten away by carbolic acid and saliva, a tiny gas stove panted at the end of its rubber leash, its paws flattened under the weight of a simmering pan: a sort of baby's bathtub, where some yellowish concoction, unknown in any pharmacopœia, bubbled night and day.

Two kinds of literature decorated the walls. One was official and, set prudently out of reach, displayed revolting pictures of cavernous lungs and purplish livers, in support of maxims to discourage the use of alcohol. The other, sprung from the native genius of the race, recklessly celebrated drinking and carnal joys in the very regions where these delights were expiated.

The examination-room managed to give an impression of cleanliness, thanks to deep cupboards where dirty linen and empty bottles collected. In former days this room had been equipped with all the sanitary and hygienic accessories for the health of a regiment; but since the war had taken the regiment away, patients had grown rare, and little by little the orderlies had adapted this equipment to the needs of their daily lives. By a slow and Darwinian evolution, the autoclave had become a waste-paper basket; the Pravaz syringes, fountain-pen fillers; the stirring rods, pen-holders; and the bistouries, pencil sharpeners. As for the absorbent cotton, serving in turn as a blotter, a handkerchief, a sponge, a stopper, and a napkin, its uses were inexhaustible.

Between the waiting-room and the examination-room swung a glass door, whose panes had been coated with white paint to separate the Holy of Holies, where the attendants officiated, from the outer darkness where pa-

tients languished, often throughout whole mornings. But anxious fingers had scratched imperceptible peep-holes in the paint, where those who were apprehensive about the coming ordeal might steal a preliminary glance, like actors eager to gauge the mood of their public.

Had I arrived in the morning, I too should have looked to see whether the white jacket, whose back would have been turned towards me, promised a good-natured reception or a brutal impatience. But at this hour of the day I entered without knocking.

The orderly on duty, armed with a bistoury and a file, was carving an aluminum ring, held in the teeth of a forceps.

"What do you want?"

"I am sick."

"You're too late. Get on tomorrow's list."

Raising a test-tube to his lips, he sipped an opaline liquid, which diffused a scent of absinthe, but was more prudently concocted from a base of paregoric; and paying no further attention to me, he set to work, with wrinkled brow and tongue in one corner of his mouth, to carve the relief for his design.

Having come this far, however, I was not prepared to retreat. I broached a conversation.

"That's delicate work, isn't it?"

He shook his head.

"I haven't the tools I need."

And he pointed piteously to the collection of instruments in his lap, which were ample to carry out the most dangerous lithotomy or the bloodiest resection.

"Nothing but this trash."

At that moment, as if to illustrate his words, the thin blade of a scalpel buckled and turned flat against the aluminum. The artist tossed it into the waste-basket with a shrug of his shoulders.

"These little meat slicers are no good."

And, with a dreamy expression, he worked an imaginary pedal under his foot.

"You know, that gadget the dentist uses, with a little wheel . . . brr . . . brr . . . brr. . . . That does the trick."

But he sighed:

"That gets broken too. . . . It's being repaired now."

I was wearing a heavy silver signet ring, which I had bought, in a moment of aberration after reading Jean Lorrain, from a decadent silversmith on the boulevard Saint-Michel. The orderly caught hold of my finger.

"That's a beauty!"

At these words I felt a breath of air in my soul as if

the door of salvation had been pushed ajar; I nibbled at the bait:

"Yes, that's a rare antique. It was worn by three bishops."

I dropped the ring in his outstretched palm. He murmured:

"That would look good in aluminum."

"Marvellous."

And, playing a close game, I held out my hand for my property.

"If they should happen to keep you here, I'd have time to copy that."

The temptation was fermenting in him, and as I remained with my hand innocently extended, he came to a decision.

"As long as you are sick, I'll admit you as an emergency case."

We passed through the dormitories, where all signs of the official suffering of the morning had vanished, now that the medical officer was gone, and had been replaced by more enjoyable worries over cards. Two or three of the patients, leaning out a window, were expounding certain amorous conceptions, in explicit gestures, to two chambermaids in a hotel room across the way. My carver of rings leaped towards the window,

scattering terrible threats of unfavorable reports and immediate dismissal for certain good-for-nothings who would not be allowed to go on fiddling away their time in an infirmary if this sort of thing kept up. With this ultimatum, he slammed the window shut—but not without having pursed his lips tenderly and winked one eye towards the bold nymphs.

"They won't have a girl left over there, if these birds get after them," he explained to me. And, doubtless to indicate the high regard in which he held me, and the distinction he drew between me and these ravaging vultures, he added:

"I am going to put you in a private room."

Opening a locked cupboard, he brought me two sheets. One of them might profitably have been cut up into match-scratchers, guaranteed never to wear out, and excellent lithographic plates; while the other, of frail muslin, threatened to fall into complete disintegration under the first restless sleeper it might be called upon to bear.

From the same source he produced a pair of slippers, apparently designed for some patient in the last stages of elephantiasis, and in which a litter of puppies could have been lodged with ease. Although the artist might readily have traced all the principle events of the

Bible and the history of France on their surface, he had been satisfied to embroider the fifty-two cards of a whist pack, which allowed the wearer, by turning and crossing his feet, to experiment with the most complicated hands.

Then my orderly added the last touch to his favoritism.

"If you'd like to have a revolver . . ."

Ah, Memory! Memory! Why dost thou thus plague me? I shook my head.

"Can't be done, old man. I'm limited service."

As it was now three o'clock in the afternoon, and as the affairs of this world could not concern me before the next morning, I made my bed and climbed into it at once, to give myself, and those about me, a full sense of the prerogatives of my new condition.

The shadows of dusk brought the corporal back to his post. This corporal was by no means a wicked man, but like many others he had been a victim of the discord between his temperament and his profession in civilian life. Born of a Spanish mother, he had grown up in the fierce climate of the South American pampas, where his education, judging from the present appearances, had differed little from the taming of the native mares. How it ever happened that this young buck, bursting with ar-

dor and energy, had become a salesman for pharmaceutical specialties, I never discovered; but he returned to the infirmary each evening, after making a round of calls on the trade, nervously repressed, and goaded by the memory of his professional obsequiousness during the afternoon into a delirium of domineering authority.

On learning of my admission as an emergency case, he roared with rage and, with clearly hostile intentions, sent the over-zealous carver of rings to take my temperature. This poor devil brought me the thermometer and announced that the corporal would come himself to take the reading. As a hint for my guidance, he rubbed one finger vigorously on his sleeve.

"Don't be afraid to hit it up."

I hit it up so well that on the first trial I registered a temperature of 110⅘; but to live up to this I should have had to die within the next twenty minutes. A more restrained attempt gave me a result of 102, which I decided to let stand.

Baffled in the matter of temperature, the corporal fell back vainly on cross-examination. To his question, "Where do you feel bad?"—I moved one hand, under the covers, towards vague areas of my body, and murmured the magic phrase:

"Pains in the back."

Whereupon I fell quietly asleep before his eyes.

⁂

As I have already indicated, the examination of those on the sick list, who came to the infirmary merely for treatment, was enveloped in a certain etiquette; but this was nothing compared with the daily tour of the dormitories.

The doctor and his orderlies passed first into a little sacristy off the main hall, where the doctor drew on a long white grocer's smock, as a symbol of his priesthood, and the choir boys—that is to say, his orderlies—wrinkled jackets which indicated their inferior rank by stopping at the knees. The worthiest was then given charge of the thermometer and the stethoscope, as if of the sacred vessels; while the corporal was entrusted with a chart, the Tablets of the Law, on which the revelations were inscribed. At the sound of these preparations, apprehension spread through the dormitories; the emphysemas, stricken with painful forebodings, hastily emptied their vials of medicine and filled their spittoons; the sprained ankles climbed swiftly into bed; the light cases of bronchitis pulled the covers up to their chins. And the visit began.

I was fortunate enough to arrive on one of those happy occasions when the medical officer in charge was absent,

having delegated his powers to a young student, who listened with inexperienced zeal and inexhaustible good faith to all of the amazing morphological novelities which the human mind, once inducted into military service, can discover in the most ordinary diseases. From the foot of my bed he drank in the detailed and pathetic account of my enteritic sufferings, wrote out a careful prescription, and ordered such a treatment as had never been heard of, and never would be heard of, in any regimental infirmary.

The corporal had obviously no liking for me. He grumbled:

"So we're going to keep this one?"

The medical student gave him a glance of horror, as though he had proposed turning a woman in labor out on the sidewalks.

"Keep him? Of course we are going to keep him!"

Restored to solitude, I set about organizing my idleness. I was enjoying the delightful sensation that a big business man must have felt, before the invention of wireless, on board a transatlantic liner. The infirmary appeared, in my eyes, as the modern representative of those temples in which outcasts once took refuge from secular authority.

That afternoon, leaning out my window, I made a

leisurely study of the strange ways of a chambermaid, in the hotel facing us, alone with her God: she strolled into the room she was to clean, equipped with all the most improved tools of her profession; but, wearied of this vain burden, she sank dreamily into an arm-chair and, drawing a long letter from her bosom, re-read it twenty times in an effort to penetrate the meaning hidden under its mistakes of spelling. Then, as there were other letters lying on the table, she read them for comparison. But apparently she preferred her own, for she slipped it back into its resting-place and tossed the others on the table with a shrug of her shoulders. Still seated, she flicked her dust-cloth absent-mindedly on either side of her and turned down the corner of a rug with her toe, toying with the illusion that she might be able to do the whole room without leaving her chair. But the bed was too far away. She dragged herself over to it, and revived her strength by draining the last few drops from a coffee-pot and picking up a pat of butter in her fingers. Then, throwing the covers in one sweep to the floor, she leaned over the exposed sheet and examined it like a judge; a nightgown that was lying on the pillow she held up against the light. What dreams, O Lord, were passing before her eyes? Apparently reassured, she spread the covers once more over the bed, tucked them in, patted

them, and thumped the pillows; the bed was made. At the dressing-table she emptied the basin into the pail without bending down, borrowed a face-towel to wipe up the linoleum, rinsed off the marble rim with the sponge, knocked a toothbrush into the bidet and fished it out again, drew a shaving-brush voluptuously across her cheek, handled the razor as though it had been a loaded revolver, and ingenuously sprinkled eau de Cologne over her brawny arms. At the mirror, she paused long enough to try on a series of hats, balancing them on her thick clump of hair and smiling at the effect.

A handful of sous and three silver coins lay temptingly scattered on a stand; she counted them thoughtfully, recounted them, and weighed them on the palm of her hand; but warned by some peasant shrewdness, she put them back with a sigh: not so stupid as all that! Then, noticing a sock on the floor, she picked it up and made sure, by forcing it a little, that one finger, and even two could pass through the hole she discovered in it. This completed her duties. . . . As if she were playing one of those games of rings at an amusement park, she strung the pitcher, the pail, the water can, the rubbish box, and the waste-paper basket over her left arm; under her right she clasped the sheaf of brooms, feather-dusters, rags, and mops; and, balancing the breakfast

tray on the tips of her fingers, she achieved the miracle of backing out the door without stumbling.

By the end of the day I had played cards, dominoes, checkers, cribbage, moro, lotto, guessing games, and put-and-take; I had thrown dice, matched coins, and done card tricks; I had vaulted over all the beds and read all the newspapers, including the one that lined the drawer of the table by my bed; I had listened to three lectures by self-appointed experts on international finance, electrical welding, and urban prostitution; I had drunk wine, milk, Vichy water, tea, coffee, brandy, orange juice, and beef bouillon; I had smoked Caporals, Marylands, Bastos, and Murattis. And, when bedtime came, I was dismayed at having compassed such a range of pleasures in so brief a time; for, vast as their scope was, it still set a limit to my activities that could not be overstepped. To postpone the moment when I should have exhausted their possibilities, I decided to devote the next day to reading.

The "library" of the infirmary, the fruit of accumulated legacies, consisted of a few books which began abruptly at about page sixteen or eighteen and stopped short at about the same number from the end; the pages themselves, marbled with shaving-soap and nose-pickings, had supplied their readers with innumerable

tooth-picks. Yet, thanks to these popular works, I made the acquaintance in a few hours of more Dukes, Princesses, Rajahs, and Barons than the King of Spain may reasonably hope to meet in a lifetime.

Alas, I had soon exhausted the thrills of such intrigues: I became blasé. After eight hours of reading—in spite of the news that Yolande d'Orgemont, the natural daughter of the Abbess de Seigleval, had poisoned the incestuous Duke de Blécourt, who had caused the arrest of Prince Sorgho, the lover of the two Countesses de Gerbétang, on charges of counterfeiting—it no longer seemed to me that such trifles were worthy of my attention.

I began to suspect that, in coming to the infirmary, I had taken my own indolence too much for granted, and that my chief's anger might be easier to endure than the boredom that would surely fall upon me the next day. With this in mind, I came to a decision, and the following morning I was at the foot of my bed, fully dressed, waiting for the doctor's visit: I had resolved to provide the rare and sublime spectacle of a sick soldier asking to be sent back to duty. Besides, the most depressing rumours were circulating through the dormitories. It seemed that it was the chief medical officer himself who was coming. The most anxious, having gone out to re-

connoitre through the key-hole in the waiting-room, returned discouraged.

"He has sent everyone so far back to duty."

"We might as well pack up our duffle."

"Cripes!"

A door slammed and I heard the corporal bawl out in the first dormitory:

". . . Shun!"

What happened next surpassed the gloomiest prophecies. His head lowered, the medical officer, who was an old colonial, trained in the exquisite manners of African troops, charged towards the first bed; but stopped short with uplifted nose like a lion scenting fresh meat.

"Stinks of tobacco in here, Corporal. That'll cost you two days in the guard-house."

"I gave strict orders against it, sir. . . ."

"Then it'll cost you four for letting them make a fool of you!"

"It must have been the orderly who brings the milk, sir."

"And that makes six, for trying to make a fool of me!"

The corporal swept the room with a long glance in which threats of revenge plainly smouldered, and the visit began.

". . . breathe deep . . . let's see your tongue. . . . Faking. . . . Report for duty.

"Must be able to move that foot by now, eh? . . . No? . . . Never mind holding it stiff . . . and stop bellowing like that! . . . There! See how it bends? That doesn't hurt, does it? . . . Perhaps I know better than you do, eh? Report for duty. . . . I can count on the cafés to make you trot. . . .

"Temperature? . . . Fine. . . . You need a little air, that's all. Report for duty."

At the fourth bed, a grievous catastrophe took place. The patient claimed a chronic and rebellious gastralgia, which made it impossible for him to speak to the doctor except with one hand pressed over his stomach. At the approach of the enemy, the patient opened an offensive:

"I wish you would take a look at me, sir. I suffered torture all last night. And I couldn't eat a thing yesterday."

Somewhat taken aback, the doctor growled:

"Is that so? . . . Well, so much the better. . . . I'm glad to find one man here who is sick. . . . What sort of pains?"

"Burnings in the stomach, sir. . . . I can't eat . . ."

"Drink milk. . . . Have you tried milk?"

"Yes, sir, but it won't go down."

"Flatulency? Distensions? Gas?"

"Gas, sir?"

"Wind, damn it!"

"All the time, sir. I can hardly eat. . . ."

"What about bouillon? Will that go down?"

"Sometimes, sir, but I never can tell. . . ."

"And oranges? How do they act?"

At each new dietary suggestion, the dormitory held its breath. Would it go down or wouldn't it? How far was this duel to be carried? The invalid shook his head. No, oranges would not go down.

"Hmm, that sounds bad, young fellow. . . . Hand me a cloth, orderly. . . . Uncover your stomach. . . ."

Placing one hand on the edge of the bolster, the medical officer rested his full weight on it as he leaned over the patient; but instantly he jerked himself up, shaking his hand in the air.

"God damn it! . . . What have you got under there that scratches? A pin-cushion? Out with it, whatever it is! Hurry up! . . ."

The poor wretch cast a glance about the room that implied clearly, "Now, brothers, on your knees and pray for me,"—and, plunging one hand under the bolster, brought out the longest, widest, fattest, heaviest, greasiest, most monstrous sandwich ever concocted of bread,

one end of which, carved into a half-moon, showed the marks of a row of teeth in a large and hearty bite. The doctor's eyes glittered. His cheeks swelled, and he uttered a series of little roars:

"Corporal . . . this man . . . guard-house . . . two weeks . . . give him time to digest . . ."

After this unfortunate incident, the visit gained noticeably in speed:

"You can walk. Report for duty.

"You look all right. Report for duty.

"No fever. Report for duty."

In the next five minutes, twelve invalids were informed of their happy recovery. I was the thirteenth and, delighted to appease the doctor's bitterness, I announced quietly as he entered:

"I wish to go back on duty, sir."

Whereupon this benevolent officer stopped short.

"Never mind what you wish. . . . Corporal, what is this man's disease?"

The Deacon placed one finger opposite the thirteenth line on the Tablets of the Law:

"Enteritis, sir."

"When did he come in?"

"Day before yesterday, sir."

"You feel better now?"

"Perfectly well, sir."

"Corporal . . . a likely young lad, eh?"

He felt my arms.

"Thin . . . need to put some flesh on those bones . . . then we'll send you back to duty. . . . I'm no brute . . ."

And the final echoes of his voice drifted down the corridor: ". . . looks like a serious young man, that fellow does . . . made a good impression on me. . . . You can use him around here . . . and yank him back in if he sticks his nose outdoors."

Put some flesh on those bones! If a genie appeared suddenly before my eyes and announced: "Mortal, make a wish—one wish—and it shall be granted," I should answer: "Genie, I wish to put on flesh." For ten years I had tried uninterruptedly, employing patience and every known diet, to put on flesh; I had learned that I could swallow five pounds of lead without increasing my weight an ounce, and I am ready today to take oath on the eternal invariability of my coefficient of flesh.

Having nothing to hurl against the walls but my slippers, and having hurled them five or six times, without destroying my gloomy imaginings of the future, I had dropped my head in my hands and was bidding farewell to the world, its pomps and circumstance, when

the orderly who had admitted me as an emergency case entered my room. The lower half of his face was obscured by the fateful sandwich and, in a voice muffled with bread, he informed me that the corporal desired nothing in the world more eagerly than the immediate pleasure of my company.

The corporal was awaiting me in the examination room, his trouser cuff strangled in bicycle clips, while he stowed away in a leather handbag an impressive cargo of little green boxes, tiny yellow tubes, Lilliputian blue phials, microscopic red cases, and infinitesimal black bottles, whose virtues he proposed to expound that afternoon in a series of persuasive and lucrative discourses to the principle pharmacists in the rue de Vaugirard.

Thus it was that I found him in the amiable mood that made his fortune in civilian life, and, without going so far as to address me as he would a druggist, he assured me, in the seductive tones he might have used on a druggist's clerk, that a life of bliss was opening up ahead of me, and that his desire to show the interest he took in me had led him to place at my disposal, for the next few hours, one pair of scissors in excellent condition and a splendid piece of adhesive plaster, not to mention a superb cutting of gauze, with the sole condition that on his return I should have ready for him the trifling figure

of a hundred bandages. Then, conferring on me his best druggist-to-bandage-maker handshake, and the smile that went with it, he set off briskly about his own affairs.

Nothing—unless it be the polishing of lenses—is so conducive to philosophy as the manufacture of bandages. The afternoon slipped quietly by; a vague serenity spread over me; bandage by bandage, I pardoned my enemies, forgot my friends, and renounced my career. By the time the last bandage was folded, I felt in myself the spiritual and physical etherealness of one of Maeterlinck's heroines, as though my soul had been spun of the gauze I was clipping.

But the corporal's return wrenched me from this Nirvana. It may be that the rue de Vaugirard had failed to display the enthusiasm for his pharmaceutical marvels that they deserved, or possibly the philosophical import of my work had outstripped its practical value; but in any event I was given to understand that certain people who thought themselves very clever were fit for nothing but emptying out slop jars; that since not all bandages were intended to cover pin-pricks, it might be useful to have a few that were larger than postage stamps; and that an unwillingness to do one's share, or feebleness of mind—he could not be sure which it was—often

brought disagreeable military consequences. Although all these generalities were apparently confided to the rear tire of the bicycle, the fringe of a towel, and the door-knob, I did not go to bed that night without wondering anxiously by what feats of brilliance I could re-establish myself, on the morrow, in my privileges of the druggist-to-bandage-maker handshake and smile.

A little while before the doctor's visit the next morning, however, an event occurred which, although it might easily have been foreseen, nevertheless brought me more luck than I had dared hope for: in executing a bit of delicate engine-turning, my friend the ring-carver sent two chips flying, one of metal and the other of flesh, with a single stroke of his bistoury. And, although he thus reduced his need for rings by one-tenth, he did not leave for the hospital without confiding to me that there, at least, he hoped to find instruments really adapted to the treacherous resistances of aluminum.

Chapter 7

ON learning of the accident, the chief medical officer voiced his satisfaction that so unmistakable a sign from heaven had confirmed his opinion of the victim's intelligence, and having rendered this pious homage to his memory, summoned me at once. When I presented myself, he delivered a little speech, couched as far as possible in monosyllables. The two-edged logic of this address might be summed up as follows:

"Personally, I consider you still sick, and therefore I am keeping you here; but you claim that you feel perfectly well, and therefore you can work."

I was then invited to step into the white blouse that the unlucky aluminum carver had just abandoned, and to take part, until further orders, in the daily celebration of the visit; not, to be sure, close to the sun—that is, by the doctor's side—but under the exalted supervision of the head orderly, who was instructed to see to it that I got the hang of things.

My new mentor, who was called "Orderly, please,"

by the patients, "Hey, you," by the corporal, and "Psst" by the medical officer, was known in private life as Clafousse, and he bore the same relation to a man that the eglantine bears to the rose, or a thistle to an artichoke. He walked with a stoop, his knees loose-jointed, and his hands, projecting from a pair of endless arms, flapping over the calves of his legs. Hairs sprouted from his ears, nostrils, brows, lips, and cheeks, like honeysuckle in the cracks of a wall, so that one saw little of his face except his throat when he yawned. He had received permission to wear his own shoes, since the army stocks could yield none of his size. Speech, for Clafousse, was the accomplishment of an august function, the manifestation of a rare gift to be employed only in case of necessity: an aid to be invoked when signs had failed. Laughter was unknown to him; at best, when he had carried an oak bench under each arm from one end of the hall to the other or had lifted the autoclave in one hand, he would stand gaping at me, while a little hoarse bark, at about the level of his first ribs, indicated his pride. He did not smoke, doubtless from fear of setting himself on fire, but was continually chewing on crusts, or other articles of meagre nourishment, such as chips of wood, which he masticated for hours before spitting out the pulp. At one time I was curious to learn what enterprise had been

blessed with the aid of Clafousse's faculties before the war: he had guarded lunatics at Bicêtre.

On being told to see to it that I got the hang of things, his mind, which burned with the subdued flame of a night-lamp, had apparently concluded that I was even less advanced in the domains of knowledge than himself; for he spent the first hours we were together in directing all my attention to the way in which he opened and shut the gas jet, the necessity of placing water over the fire to make it boil, and the disadvantages of exposing ether to a flame, watching my face as he talked for signs of my amazement at these miracles of nature.

After a few days, however, I realized that, simple as he might appear, Clafousse was displaying an accomplished Machiavellianism. He had taught me to bring up food, take down the pail of soiled bandages, wash the dishes, count the dirty sheets, clean off the tables, and fold up blankets. And as I mastered these tasks, he surrendered them to me, one by one, with the modesty of a man who has found his superior. But at the end of a week I noticed that, although I could find the broom with my eyes shut, I was still ignorant as to where the antipyrin was kept; and that whatever might be said of my agility in emptying the rubbish can with one turn of the wrist, my skill in applying the cupping-glass still awaited its first test.

It was in vain that I called Clafousse's attention to these gaps in my training: he gave me to understand that, like Mary, I had chosen the better part, but that it was fitting I should limit myself to those few specialties in which my mastery was unquestioned.

All entreaties were useless: scenting a rival, Clafousse hid the iodine, and turned his back towards me while mixing infusions. There was only one object in the infirmary that submitted with tireless complaisance to my craving for applying bandages and giving massages; and that was the corporal's bicycle. Each evening I had the honor of lubricating its chain with boracic vaseline, and loosening its joints with injections of camphorated oil in the hubs.

But eventually I was granted hope of relief.

Like the toad in the fairy tale, who was restored to his true princeliness for one day in every hundred years, I was privileged, on the doctor's arrival, to become a patient again for one minute each day. In that ineffable moment, the doctor pinched my arms to assure himself that, in all conscience, he could not dismiss me from the infirmary:

"No flesh on those bones yet? . . . Come, come! Corporal, here's a man that won't put on flesh. . . . He likes it here, the lucky dog. . . ."

And he tapped me on the shoulder with a genial air of shutting his eyes to my little game. When this was over, I was allowed to go off and amuse myself for all I was worth in the next room with a scrub-brush and a pail of water. Lucky dog! . . . But one morning, still exhilarated from the sport he had just had with a stubborn boil, the doctor stopped me at the door, as I was about to go out for a frolic with the dirty dishes of the night before.

"Well, young man, are you getting the hang of things around here? . . . Learn fast with Clafousse, eh? . . . He's a professional, Clafousse is. . . . Knows his business. . . . Corporal, is this man taking hold in good shape? . . . Won't put on flesh, but he gets the hang of things, eh? . . . From now on you can let him take charge of the spittoons . . . responsible job . . . give him a little exercise . . . lucky dog. . . ."

And doubtless to escape any effusions of gratitude on my part, he slapped his kepi on his head—a pious relic of the great days of the taking of Dahomey—and waddled off, his knees wide apart and his toes turned out, gripping the saddle of an imaginary horse.

The management of the spittoons, it must be understood, was no mean prerogative. Clafousse himself, the professional Clafousse, had achieved it only after a long

novitiate, and its loss would ring in his ears as the knell of his favor and the matin bells of mine.

In addition to the small fry with slight illnesses, there was one class of patients who appeared every morning, at the hour of the visit, and to whom the Department of Health had drawn official attention by numerous circulars: these were the men with bronchitis, or the chronic coughers, who were always open to suspicion, and for whom a bacteriological examination was compulsory. Each of these deposited his offering in a porcelain spittoon, under the attentive eye of Clafousse, who carried the specimens, during the morning, to the laboratory.

Clafousse turned these receptacles over to me with a wave of the left hand, which signified his detachment from the vanities of the world, his resignation under the blows of fate, and his mental reservations concerning the consequences. But the magic prospect of escaping outdoors each day would have made me brave more troubling omens than these.

In the absence of any instructions from Clafousse, experience soon taught me that it was wiser to indicate a spittoon on a distant table than to hold one out, in the narrow circle of my hands, exposed to trajectories that it was impossible to calculate, since most of the candidates—convinced that the seriousness of their case would

be measured by the volume of their contribution—did not hesitate to do things generously, to the benefit of everything in the neighborhood of the proposed target. On such occasions, Clafousse had been accustomed to wipe his hands on his beard, but I did not wear one, and I doubted whether he would lend me his.

The weather gratified my highest expectations and, from the first day in my new functions, I tasted the nectar of a divine existence. As I was about to set out that morning, the doctor repeated:

". . . No monkey-shines with those spittoons, eh?" as if the privilege of handling them would lead one infallibly into deviltry.

To fortify myself against this temptation, and also, I must confess, through an unnecessary fear of appearing ridiculous, I wrapped my porcelain treasures in newspaper, and at last crossed the threshold of the infirmary with a free step, overwhelmed with more good advice from the corporal than Little Red Riding Hood when she left for the forest. As a matter of fact, there were only one or two streets to cross on the way to the laboratory, and the first day I made the trip in ten minutes. The second day, in my report to the corporal, I transformed a brief stop in a café into the absence of the head orderly at the laboratory, which was normal. The difficulty that

I experienced, the third day, in finding my favorite cigarettes in the neighborhood obliged me to give the corporal a detailed account of a long search for the proper blank forms in the office of the laboratory, which was plausible. The fourth day, having gone home for lunch, I interested the corporal to the best of my ability with a story of a load of coal which had been upset in the street and had blocked the entrance to the laboratory: a model of vivid and first-hand narrative. From that time on, moreover, a relentless fatality surrounded my movements, the rue Vaneau, the laboratory, the head orderly, the office, and the woman who cleaned the spittoons. Like the nigger at county fairs, doomed to stop baseballs with his devoted head each day, the corporal was henceforth obliged to suffer one tale of disaster each afternoon.

There was the woman who was knocked down by a taxi; the boy who was run over by a milk wagon; the old man who was crushed by a truck. Yet, generally speaking, these misadventures ended better than could have been expected, thanks to my indefatigable activity: I escorted the woman home to her family, the boy to a drug store, the old man to the hospital. Thanks to my care, blind men who had lost their way were guided to their rooms, however far off they lived. And how many

mothers, in those days, were indebted to me for the return of their babies! Then there was the mad dog that, after an hour of manœuvring to seize hold of, I dragged at the risk of my life to the pound—and handled so skilfully that I had not a scratch to show for it. At intervals of forty-eight hours a fire broke out in the rear of the dairy next door to the laboratory, balanced by alternate floods in the cellar of the laundry on the other side. I attracted disasters, and disaster attracted me: we were like a magnet and filings; yet I doubt whether my superiors would have vouched for my narratives under oath. This was also a time when there were many long funerals, and it was impossible to cross the streets. It was in the day of memorial services when the orderlies of the laboratory, assembled in the main hall, forgot the humble duty of receiving my spittoons for hours at a time. I say nothing of the pocketbooks I picked up in the street and carried to the police station: anyone in my place would have done as much.

The corporal was for a time amazed at this outbreak of catastrophes. At the first episodes that I reported to him, he showed such callousness that the crushing of a young girl by a street car or the paralytic stroke of an octogenarian provoked in him only a sarcastic laugh, ill justified by such tragic circumstances. As for Clafousse,

my tale of a runaway horse, which had dragged me the full length of the rue de Sèvres, subjected his larynx to such rattles and scrapings that I had gladly eased him, had I been able, by laughing for him. But the corporal and Clafousse soon noticed that the depression their lack of feeling produced in me exercised a direct influence on the energy I displayed, on my return, in nursing the bicycle and cleaning out the waiting-room. From the moment that the correlation between these phenomena became plain, the corporal gave me to understand that in the future he would have the deepest sympathy for all disasters that might darken my mornings, on condition that I should recover from them early enough not to hinder the druggists of the Left Bank from receiving their supply of pills, plasters, syrups, and other invaluable specialties.

From that day forward, I renounced any ambition to be restored to my assistant director and decided to remain a hospital orderly until some more favorable chance should appear, in spite of my recent humiliation, for me once more to taste the emotions of the front, which as yet I had only glimpsed but whose recollection still had the power, in my hours of solitude, to set up a great beating of wings in my memory.

Chapter 8

IT was not long after this that Clafousse revealed the secret of his life to me. One evening, while the corporal was out, he locked the door, sat down on a chair and dragged it between his legs until it was close to mine. Then, with a sigh, he felt inside his jacket and produced a pocketbook as large as a valise; balanced on his knees, it opened of itself like an over-ripe fruit. From it he drew out a bunch of keys, a pack of cards, a handful of buttons, a cigarette-holder in a case, a pair of scissors, several shoe-laces, a half of a comb, a broken mirror, a watch with one hand missing, and a pair of spectacle frames; I waited for him to hold up the live rabbit, the miniature aquarium, and the cluster of red, white, and blue flags that usually mark the end of such performances. Finally, after a bundle of worn letters and a movie program, he dredged a last pocket and brought out a piece of cardboard folded in an old furlough. Clafousse sighed again and handed it to me, saying:

"Look."

As I unwrapped the furlough, he covered his knees with his huge hairy fists, and followed my movements as attentively as though he were about to learn the contents of the paper. It was a photograph, pasted on a stiff cardboard back, with gilded corners, the background representing a large formal garden, in the French style, where a dainty Louis Quinze tabouret had mysteriously blossomed. In this majestic setting, which was slightly disturbed by the tip of one wing of an airplane—reserved by the photographer for sporting customers—stood a young woman, holding herself rigid, her hair neatly coiled in an ugly knot on her head, her hands dangling awkwardly, and her face stupefied by the solemnity of the occasion. Another sigh rasped Clafousse's throat; obviously, this was love; love, in all its tenderness, had once lodged in this uncouth frame. I turned to the picture again, more curiously, and what I saw this time was neither more nor less than the most exquisite of faces, a little straight smooth brow, sensitive lips, and a delicate throat. In my imagination I hastily loosened the clumsy knot of hair, breathed life into the staring eyes, banished the tabouret, allowed the arms to fall into a natural position, and changed the dress. The result was a miracle; I was gazing at one of the loveliest

of Lawrence's portraits, suffused with a melancholy grace: a woman to drive sages mad and to melt the will of conquerors. The presence of her picture in Clafousse's pocketbook was in itself so scandalous that I hesitated to return it. What hope could such a picture hold out to him?

It was mere politeness that made me ask:

"Your girl?"

Clafousse spit out the end of a pen-holder he was chewing and leaned towards me:

"My wife."

As I stared at him uncomprehendingly, he jerked his chin towards the photograph and, tapping his forehead gently:

"Mad."

No, that face and those eyes might be sad, but surely they were not those of a lunatic. I shrugged my shoulders, though I should no more have expected a joke from Clafousse than speech from a fish.

"She doesn't look it in this picture."

"No, that was taken before."

He groped on the table for something to chew, tore off the corner of a blotter, and began to talk as he had never talked before, his eyes staring into space.

"They lived in the rooms next to mine. . . . I didn't know her, but I used to come home every evening the same time as her father. And as soon as he got in the house, she would begin screaming so I couldn't hear myself eat. . . . The only good it did for me to pound on the wall was that he beat her harder to make her keep still. I got so I could tell where he was hitting her from the way the kid yelled . . . especially when he hit her in the stomach or over the shoulders, it was enough to split your ear-drums. I used to think every night: 'She'll run away from him sure . . .' and I'd be patient. . . . But then, the next evening, it would begin all over again. Well, one night, while the racket was going on, you understand, I yelled through the wall: 'Let her alone! I'll take her if she bothers you!' And that was that. It didn't mean a damn to me, but it was the only kind thing to do. Well, after that, I began going with her. . . . Seems she wanted to be a nun, or something like that. Her first communion put that notion into her head. . . . And so far as that goes, her old man was right. I don't like these pious folk. . . ."

I could not keep from interrupting Clafousse in this horrible tale.

"What was her name?"

"Cécile."

Cécile. Sister Cécile . . . I gazed at the little card to see how Sister Cécile would have looked in the simple woollen gown of the voluntary virgin.

"And then?"

"We got married one day."

"In the church?"

"No, her father wouldn't let her, on account of the fellows he worked with. I didn't give a damn."

Clafousse stopped, and stared at the floor between his legs.

"It was that night . . . in bed . . . that . . ."

And, with his forefinger, bristling with hairs to the nail, he once more tapped his forehead softly.

I gazed at his monstrous legs, his shaggy, flattened face, like some animal's; his enormous, wrinkled arms —which lifted the autoclave as easily as a stool—plunged into the shadow of his sleeves in solid masses of flesh.

He picked his teeth with a pen that lay on the table.

"It hit her all of a sudden . . ."

Already shaken by what he had told me, I looked into his eyes as I asked:

"Before . . . ?"

He stared at me.

"Before? Oh, yes. . . . Almost . . ."

He loosened his tie and, bending his head, showed me

his neck. Under one ear, a gap in his beard exposed the white, oval mark of a row of teeth.

"She gave me that."

His hands dangling like bags between his knees, he continued:

"I had to hold her quiet all night. . . . I tied her hands to the mattress . . . In the morning they took her away. And I slept all that day. . . . They're terrible to hold, crazy people. . . ."

The little cardboard was still in my hand . . . Cécile . . . Sister Cécile . . . broken body, shattered soul . . .

"Will she get well?"

"No. She thinks she is at the convent, she calls the nurses 'Sister.' They say she'll go off suddenly some day. Meanwhile, they give her work to do."

Clafousse spit out his wad of blotter, and stepped on it.

"The doctor says it wasn't my fault, that she inherited something from her father. It was bound to happen . . . and so . . ."

The photograph was returned to its unworthy place in the old furlough, at the bottom of the valise, with the scissors and the spectacle frames; and Clafousse crossed the room, with dragging feet, to unlock the door.

"It haunts me some nights," he said.

There are nights when I too think of the little sister

of the mad, of Clafousse's huge knees, and of that dreadful, kind deed. And to think that, if God is just, it will stand on his record!

⁂

As I now had my new trade at my finger-tips, I decided to use what influence I could command to make myself independent of a fictitious recovery, and obtain a definite appointment as a male nurse. Such things could be arranged, it appeared, with the greatest ease, if one were shrewd enough to win the favor, not of powerless lieutenants or invisible commandants, but of the orderly in the office or the bicyclist on duty for the week. From having often heard it said, I had believed in my youth that one attained success in life through women—though this reflection had not encouraged any illusions about my own future career. But I have since discovered that it is through servants. I do not know whether great men are ever heroes to their valets, but I am sure that it is through his valet that more than one man has become great, since the day when a lackey's hesitation in shutting a door delivered France into Maurepas' hands for fifteen years. It is, in fact, necessary that some such system should prevail, and I am convinced that our good commandant was not sorry to have his work simplified by these preliminaries in the orderly-room.

I returned to the infirmary as proud as an ensign with his new commission in his pocket. Since the doctor had taken a liking to me, he would be happy to learn that I had taken a liking to him, and that my discreet initiative had legitimized our free union. When he arrived the next morning, he was in a merry mood, and as I could hear him whistling from the foot of the stairs, he discovered me vigorously engaged in the morning sweeping. He growled his compliments to me as he passed, entered the examination room, and began the daily sorting of circulars, notes, reports, and inventories, starred with august signatures and subaltern thumb-prints. In his own eyes, this was the solemn period of his visit. He spoke of a Paper, a Document, or an Official Order with capital letters in his voice, ran his thumb softly over the signatures to determine whether they were original or mimeographed, and then read the paper through in a stage whisper, with a *crescendo* effect on the long words ending in "—tion," and a delicate shading for the restraint of the imperative conditionals: "It would be advisable that . . ."—or rubbing single sheets with his thumb in an attempt to make them open out, from fear of having missed something.

But the satisfaction he enjoyed in reading was nothing compared with that of signing. Carefully he selected his

hierarchic place among the signatures already attached, placing his own as close as possible to those of his superiors, so that no insignificant subordinate's name should ever separate him, in the course of future centuries, from this noble company. Then, with the gravity befitting the execution of a contract, he seized his pen and signed, which does not mean that he wrote his name or anything resembling it. Instead he traced a sort of epileptic pendant, struggling for space, like the ingenious pattern of the insignia worn by colonels in former days, or the flourishes of braid on the backs of old dolmans. And these flowers of penmanship, these double-eights of fancy skating, ended in a long straight line which fastened the whole, like a spider's web, to one corner of the page. This was for him the supreme moment of his day. Through the half-opened door, that morning, I watched his progress, waiting for him to come upon my transfer. He always read each paper twice, once for pleasure, and once to understand it; but on this occasion the operation was less laborious. On reaching my name, he uttered a tigerish roar, which I found it impossible, in spite of my great desire, to interpret as a sign of joy.

"Corporal! . . . Did you know about this? Eh?"

I had acted only after friendly and urgent advice

from the corporal. But he now took my transfer, examined it so attentively that you would never have guessed he had gone over it the night before, and—as was to be expected after the doctor's bellow—shook his head in saddened surprise.

"Never heard a word about it, sir."

"Send that man here . . . at once."

Concealed behind the door, I realized with a supreme effort towards mental clarity that I could hardly display the same ignorance as the corporal.

The doctor fluttered the paper under my nose.

"What have you been up to? . . . Eh? . . . Are you crazy?"

From the moment that he began to treat me like a patient, I knew that I was lost.

"You, a male nurse? . . . nurse my boots, maybe . . ."

"You told me, sir, that . . ."

"I didn't tell you anything. . . . Besides, it is none of your business what I told you."

In desperation, I insisted:

"As I have been here a month now, sir, and am familiar with the work, I thought that you would be happy, sir, to . . ."

The doctor reared like a charger.

"Happy, eh? . . . happy! . . . Who asked you to look after my happiness? . . . In the first place, you don't know how to be a nurse. . . ."

"I thought that, since I was taking Lacroix's place . . ."

"That has nothing to do with it! Lacroix was a professional. I want professionals under me. The corporal is a professional, Clafousse is a professional . . . You? What the hell did you do in civilian life, eh?"

"I am a man of letters, sir."

At this the cup overflowed.

"Not a nurse, but a man of letters . . . Good God! . . . This is a fine business. . . . You're not sick any more, are you?"

"No, sir, I haven't been for a month."

"Very well . . . Then there's no excuse for your hanging around here any longer. . . . Corporal, put the man of letters down to report for duty . . . not tomorrow, today . . ."

On the threshold of the section barracks, as I was entering with the calm intrepidity that a sense of military affairs develops in one, I met the commandant. I had held his life in my hands; he had held my liberty in his. Such things create bonds. He recognized me.

"How are you getting along now as an interpreter?"

"I am no longer an interpreter, sir. I was taken sick."

"In that case, you must look after yourself."

"I am not sick any longer, sir."

"What are you now?"

"Male nurse, sir."

"A good assignment. You must try to stay where you are . . . Where are you?"

"Nowhere, sir."

"Then, in that case, you must not stay there."

This excellent man, who—I take pleasure in repeating—treated each of his four or five thousand soldiers like an only son, led me at once to a personnel adjutant, whom we found sitting astride a table watching a celebrated actor tie up packages of pipe tobacco.

"Find me an assignment as male nurse for this lad, will you?"

And he went out, leaving the aroma of his smile behind him, like a delicate perfume.

"That makes the fiftieth he has brought in here this morning," the adjutant confided to the celebrated actor. He meditated for a moment and then:

"Male nurse, did you say?"

He meditated again:

"I'll send you to Billy."

Billy was not, as I had feared, the name of some re-

mote locality, but an abbreviation for the army bakeries at the quai Debilly. Since there is little profit in repeating descriptions, I shall refrain from any detailed account of the infirmary there, which was much like the one I had just left, except that it was a little dirtier and a little more poverty-stricken. Set apart from the other buildings, like a lepers' ward, it gave the impression, from a distance, of an old-fashioned outhouse. From the medical point of view, it was undoubtedly the most squalid parish in the whole diocese of the 22nd Section. A young vicar—that is to say, a young medical graduate—officiated there in addition to his regular duties. But his rôle consisted exclusively in distinguishing between those who were not sick, whom he sent back to duty, and those who were, whom he bundled off at once to Latour-Maubourg, keeping for himself only the neuralgias and the eczemas.

There was only one other orderly besides myself, named Mayeu. He was a likable young man whom the war had wrenched from his studies in history, and who brought to his military duties all the philosophy garnered in his studies. He explained to me that this war was at least the eight or nine hundredth that he had met in his career as an historian, and that, taking it all in all, there was not one of its features that could not be duplicated

in some war of the past if one looked carefully. Nevertheless he regretted—and on days when the outcome of the war seemed to hang in the balance, his regret was an actual suffering—that his lameness prevented him from sharing its perils. His only consolation lay in the grandeur of the act of humility he was accomplishing in subordinating his position as a scholar to his functions as a male nurse. Each day he bought five or six francs' worth of newspapers and periodicals, which he spent the evening cutting out, pinning together, and filing, in the hope of some day demonstrating that nothing had been written, in any paper on any subject, since the outbreak of the war, which was the absolutely pure reflection of the absolutely exact truth; and he was confident that this exposure would result in the banishment of history from all school curricula and its classification as one of the arts of amusement.

He was a delightful companion, however, and his conversation would have been perfect had he only been able occasionally to step outside his professional lines of thought. We are all familiar with people who cannot meet a stranger without instantly comparing him with someone they have known. You introduce such a person to M. Durand and he whispers to you: "His eyes are just like Dupont's, aren't they?" or "The lower half

of his face might be Dufour himself, mightn't it?"—Mayeu, my new colleague, suffered from this passion for analogies, and in his case it was aggravated by his amazing ability to nourish it on the whole of history. The first time he saw me, he studied me critically: "Did anyone ever tell you that you looked like Philip the Fair?"

It was in this style that he described all the personalities of the bakery to me.

"Wait until you see the lieutenant, he is a perfect type: a mop of hair like Cuvier's and moustaches like Cromwell. And as for the commandant, all you have to do is imagine Louis VI as an old man."

Occasionally, during the medical officer's visit, Mayeu would catch my sleeve and, with a wink of tacit understanding, point to some poor devil suffering from an inflammation:

"Thucydides."

In his eyes the bakeries were merely an immense Eden Musée, a sort of Elysian Fields where Gambetta trundled off the bread baked by Pope Leo X under the supervision of Genghis Khan.

At first I imagined that this was a bluff and, determined to catch him in it, I nudged his elbow one day as an orderly went by and suggested at random:

"Nana-Sahib."

Mayeu scrutinized the orderly.

"You must be thinking of someone else. His lips were much thinner than that. You should look up the 1858 intaglio in the British Museum."

From that moment I allowed myself to be introduced without protest to a Henry the Eighth in a baker's smock, a Leibnitz with dirty finger-nails, or an Alexander the Great trembling with timidity.

The day after my arrival, I made the acquaintance of the medical officer. He was a slim adolescent, with a boyish voice, surprised by the mobilization when his first frogs had been barely dissected, and grateful to us for treating him as a comrade. The notion that a certain authority was vested in him had never entered his head, and the only way in which he ever showed his rank was by the solemn countenance he maintained in telling us delicate lies before his patients.

I had been there only a few days when I discovered that the supply of kermes tablets was running low, and in my neatest handwriting I drew up a requisition on the Infirmary of the 22nd Section. But when I presented it to the doctor, he and Mayeu looked at each other in silence.

"He doesn't know," said Mayeu.

"We'll have to tell him," said the doctor.

I learned then that the humble infirmary of Billy, discreet and inconspicuous as it was, had nevertheless a terrible enemy in the person of the chief medical officer at Latour-Maubourg; this man did not merely wish it ill: he sought its death. Twenty times at least he had urged the commandant to do away with this relief station, which had no beds, no ambulance, no equipment, and no use except to send its patients to a more competent infirmary. He assured the commandant spitefully that if a real invalid should ever come to us for aid, his end would be only a question of days—if his resistance were good; otherwise, of hours. This was no doubt true, but he might have added that no real invalid, within the memory of any chief medical officer, had ever been seen at the Billy infirmary; our soldier-bakers, who lived at home, had sense enough to stay there whenever they felt sick, and in fact often did so for no other reason than that they felt well. Twenty times the commandant had replied that he would think the matter over; but so far these negotiations had had no result except to throw Mayeu and the doctor into spasms of apprehension. For the moment, the chief medical officer's hostility seemed to have lulled; and Mayeu's and the doctor's one purpose in life, as it was henceforth to be mine also, was to efface from his memory any recollection that an in-

firmary had ever existed at the bakeries. It had been decided over night that under no circumstances would the Billy infirmary ever appeal to Latour-Maubourg for help or supplies. And at first it had been easy to adhere to this policy. An inventory had revealed a full bottle of aspirin, several pounds of lime leaves for infusions, a drawerful of bandages, a half bottle of kermes, three quarts of alcohol, fifty iodine tablets, thirty sodium sulphate wafers, and a whole bundle of hospital orders.

A double course of strategy had been laid out. On the one hand, we were never, under any pretext, to forward any invalids to Latour-Maubourg, any more than we were to requisition medicine from it; and on the other, we were to encourage the staff at the bakeries, by every means we could devise, to keep us informed of their slightest ailments, so that on the day when the chief medical officer, in spite of our efforts, should remember us, the infirmary could present an imposing list of patients, in justification of its imperious necessity.

Every morning Mayeu and I rushed for the list.

"Two more than yesterday! Things are picking up."

"Ah! Terrasse and Clauchon are back today. I was beginning to get worried. That made four days they hadn't come, the rascals."

On the days when no patients had appeared by eight

o'clock, Mayeu went out and strolled craftily past the ovens. From time to time he stopped beside one of the men, exclaiming with concern:

"Hello! What's the matter with you? You look run down, old man. I'll put you on the list."

Or:

"Let's see that hand. Hmmm . . . That looks bad. Did it with a nail, you say? Bad things to monkey with, nails. . . . You had better see the doctor. I'll put your name down."

This clandestine recruiting kept us supplied with a comfortable little trade.

One day Mayeu emerged from the examination-room with joy in his eyes.

"Hurrah! There must have been a dead cat in the soup. You ought to see the line that is waiting in there, it's marvellous."

But although this propaganda made us popular among the soldiers of the bakery, it also made devastating inroads on our supplies. Eventually Mayeu grew alarmed.

"The aspirin is all shot to hell, sir," he told the doctor.

The next morning, our prescriptions were changed from fifty centigrams of aspirin and one day off duty to twenty-five centigrams of aspirin and two days off duty. Meanwhile I became a master in the art of bandaging.

To husband our materials, I took the most accurate measurements of scratches to be covered and learned to be miserly with adhesive tape, slicing the strips in half. The chief medical officer might come if he wished: there would be patients to show him. My bandages, like the hats designed by great milliners, were made out of nothing at all yet managed to create a handsome impression.

In spite of the most sordid economy, however, our medicine cabinet grew horribly empty. One day, in an emergency, I was forced to run to the nearest drug store for more of the indispensable absorbent cotton. The good doctor never returned from Latour-Maubourg, where the other half of his duties called him, without as many pills and tablets in his pockets as he had been able to smuggle out. But the daily visit was henceforth an hour of anguish.

"Can I give a purge today?" he would ask.

"Yes, but no aspirin, under any circumstances," Mayeu would reply.

One afternoon, in a dark corner whose privacy had been respected for months by the broom, I discovered a fat-bellied bottle filled to the stopper with blackish globules. Here was perhaps a precious reinforcement!

"Here come the reserves!" exclaimed Mayeu.

I tasted a globule. He tasted one. But the bottle kept its secret. We set it on the table and waited in feverish enthusiasm for the doctor. He took a third globule in his hand, chewed it, and spit it out gloomily:

"Copaiba: that's for sentimental complications. They'd rather kick the bucket, every last one of them, than ask for that."

To satisfy his conscience, however, he announced a general health examination for the following day. Naturally, all those who had excellent reasons for avoiding it found even better excuses for not appearing, and the bottle of copaiba was restored to the shadows from which it had been drawn.

For the next week we lived on six antipyrin tablets, two quinine tablets, and three cinchonine pills. Generous applications of confinement to bed and exemption from active duty did the rest. I do not know whether I shall ever see our young doctor again, but I have the fullest confidence as to his career: he will be unsurpassed as a doctor for charity boards or insurance companies.

I need hardly say that the therapeutic methods in use in our phantom infirmary would have brought about its downfall in three days anywhere else than in our blessed bakeries, where the men were soldiers only by the grace of uniforms and left their military ovens each evening—

or each morning, according to the shift they worked—to return to their domestic beds or to more profitable kneading-boards.

Nevertheless a real invalid did occasionally appear. In better days, he would have been sent on to the mother institution at Latour-Maubourg. But in the difficult situation through which we were steering our course, we would rather have installed him in a private sanatorium at our own expense than to have let him come within sight of the chief medical officer. Fortunately, a less expensive recourse was still open to us: every morning the Department of Health supplied us with a list of hospitals to which the infirmaries might send patients in emergency cases. Thanks to the sure mechanism of these oubliettes, we could easily cause the disappearance —and to his own benefit—of any candidate for fever, phlegmasia, or other important physical disgrace. This method cost us only one blank form out of a drawerful.

At least, it cost us only one blank form when our candidate was obviously ill, and we could ship him out with a good rousing temperature or large bandages dripping with saturated cotton. But unfortunately there were others, usually stricken with invisible gastritis, or discreet hernias or varicose veins, too serious for us to cope with, but small game for a hospital. And to make it worse,

these were always the ones that arrived clean and well shaven, weakening their already slight claim to consideration by the deplorable neatness of their appearance. In such cases, it was no longer merely a blank form that it cost us, but a whole afternoon of patience, scheming, and reconnoitring. Setting out at two o'clock, Mayeu would return at seven, exhausted and hoarse, but always triumphant, and regaining his voice to sing the epic of his struggles and his victory:

"Well, that's done. And you'll never guess where I landed him. In Auxiliary 514, the former Sanatorium for Girl Mothers of the Seine. They have been waiting for a patient ever since the war broke out; it did me good to see their delight at getting one. You should have heard them running up and down the corridors: 'Hurry up! We must notify the head doctor at once.—What has happened?—A patient, my dear.—No!—Yes, really, isn't it wonderful?—A patient, goodness!'—But before discovering 514, I had a day of it. First I tried the Grand Palais; they laughed at me, of course. Then I went across the Concorde, past the Madeleine, and up the rue de Rome to Chaptal: they don't handle anything but venereal cases now. Then I thought of Saint-Antoine; no vacancies. At Boucicaut, I interrupted an interne who was playing horseback with a little girl—hardly a day

over eighteen—on his knees. I didn't try to argue with him. At the Croix-de-Berny, nothing but venereal cases either. Then I came back across town to Saint-Louis: no vacancies. At the Franco-Russian Hospital, a fathead asked me questions for an hour, filled out an entry card, assigned the patient to a bed, stamped a receipt, and finally asked, 'He's a Russian, of course, isn't he?' . . . From there I went to the Pasteur. They read my slip; no vacancies. At 56, I saw the medical officer himself; I produced my slip again, he read it and passed it. 'Bring in the patient.' I brought him up. 'Is that what you call a patient?' He nearly took my head off. After that, there wasn't much I could think of but the Foundlings' Home or the steps of some church. The driver objected to going on and claimed that if I had taken a taxi it would already have cost me two hundred francs. It wasn't until I got to 514 that everything worked like a charm. You can bet I took orders for our next ones."

By such devices we succeeded in keeping up an appearance of activity and importance at the Army Bakeries Infirmary. The reader will hardly understand our apprehensions and our efforts unless he recalls the sad fate that, in those days, hovered over every unassigned member of the S. O. S. Thanks to his decided limp and to my defective eyesight, which was beyond all hope of

cure, Mayeu and I had twice been pronounced unfit for the Army Zone. My expedition to Rheims had been merely a lucky fraud, promptly expiated by the Antwerp fiasco. My destiny, in fact, was regulated by a highly intelligent ruling which consisted in transferring all members of the S. O. S. in the provinces to Paris and all those in Paris to the provinces. Since this arrangement involved the greatest possible discomfort and the least possible pleasure for those it affected, and since it over-crowded the trains and threw the service into confusion, there was not an adjutant in the army who did not bring all the resources of his intelligence to bear in applying it to the last letter. Mayeu lived in even greater dread than myself; every time a group of casuals left during the day, he came on duty in the evening in the blackest depression.

"Vial has been sent to Romorantin. Belatte, the designer, has gone to Issoudun to grease trucks."

I did my best to cheer him up.

"Tell them that you are a graduate student and have research work to do."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"The hell you say. Do you know what I was doing before I came here? I was driving cattle. I was the mountain shepherd lad—at Longchamps. And at that, when

I say I was driving cattle, it's an exaggeration. I drove them once, and the next day I was transferred as a male nurse."

I looked at Mayeu, with his head like that of a professor about to begin a lecture, his fingers long trained in turning over manuscripts, and the indefinable university touch he had given to his uniform—and, scenting one of those pathetic and ridiculous tales that lie like a fringe around the pomp of the French army, as of all armies, I urged:

"Tell me about it."

"There was a dairyman named Mayeu," he began. "Naturally, they confused me with him, and the day after I arrived at Latour-Maubourg I was sent to Longchamps to tend cattle at the camp in the park. The first few days it was no worse than any other job. I was free to go home every evening and do a bit of work for myself. During the day I sat on the grass, watched the cows chew their cuds, and thought of Virgil's farmers, who did not know how well off they were. But one day a new sergeant appeared, with a muzzle like François d'Amboise's, a brute off some farm, whose notion of happiness in life consisted in examining cows under the tail, pulverizing their dung to discover the state of their health, and washing his hands in their slaver. Some men are

congenial at sight; we had no sooner laid eyes on each other than I detested him and he hated me: it struck us like lightning. The first evening he said to me:

" 'Mayeu, you milk the cows, like the rest, don't you?'

"And there I was with a milk pail. I picked out a good plump Flemish cow that let me fumble about her as much as I liked, and was even obliging enough to fan me with her tail. But all my pulling and tickling of her little faucets had no effect; I could have got milk out of myself easier than I could have squeezed a drop out of that cow. And I suspected that the sergeant would be lying in wait for me if I failed. So, what do you suppose I did? I sucked, like a babe. I drank in, spit out, drank in, spit out. . . . And if there ever was an amazed man, it was the sergeant when I brought back my pail. That evening he called me out of line:

" 'Well, Mayeu, you're coming along, old man. I'm glad of that.'

"I don't need to tell you that he reeked of hatred.

" 'There are a dozen cows to go to La Villette tomorrow,' he added. 'I'll put you in charge of them.'

"As soon as I got home, I rushed for a map. From Longchamps to La Villette was five miles, if I went straight across Paris. I said to my wife:

" 'I'll tie them all together. Then it'll be simple.'

"I knew it wouldn't be, but what can you say to a woman who has collapsed on the sofa and is sobbing like a child?

"Suddenly she stopped sobbing, snuffed up her tears, and clapped her hands.

" 'I know! Take Diana with you.'

"Diana was my wife's dog, a fat, clumsy, hairy bitch, the best dog in the world for stealing food off the table and upsetting stands. It was understood between us, on the authority of my wife's girlhood memories, that Diana was an incomparable watch-dog. But that evening my wife also remembered that Diana had been given to her in the country, and that in its youth the dog had escorted cows to pasture. And, by dint of a little more imaginative recollection, she assured herself that Diana's father had been a German shepherd dog.

" 'Please take Diana with you! I want you to. She'll know what to do.'

"Diana, on being questioned, planted her nose in my lap and wagged her tail, and on this ambiguous testimony I arrived the next morning at Longchamps with Diana at my heels. I interpreted her frisking and barking as signs of joy at finding familiar scenes again; and, somewhat reassured, I guided my dozen cows, with occasional thwacks on their rumps, towards the exit

from the Park. As long as we were in the Bois, things went fairly well. My cattle stayed more or less on the road. Diana, having no straying cows to round up, did her best to round up bicyclists and babies, which at least gave me confidence in her herding instincts. I was merely obliged to assure the bicyclists and babies she had knocked over that she was not dangerous.

"My troubles began at the Place de l'Étoile, where Diana attempted to drive my twelve cows under the Arc de Triomphe. Eventually she consented to trot under alone, and we moved down the Champs-Élysées without too much ostentation, thanks to a fox terrier which pursued Diana at top speed from the Étoile to the Place de la Concorde. Unfortunately, at that point Diana developed a more serious conscience about her duties; scorning the fox terrier, she marched at my heels for a few paces and then, with a little yelp, cocked her head on one side as if to tell me that I should see what I should see. And, as a street car was clanging behind us, she moved my whole herd up on the sidewalk: the general ovation that followed this exploit was the signal for her to run wild. She tried successively to drive my innocent cattle down the gaping jaws of the subway entrance at the rue Lepeletier, to crowd them into the front door at number 63 rue La Fayette, and to install them on the

terrace at the Café Mayran. It was after this that, foreseeing worse disasters, I chased her, intending to put her on a leash; but it never occurred to her that I was running after her: she imagined that I was running with her, and was in the seventh heaven of delight. Wheeling around as if on a race-course, she took my twelve cows in hand, so to speak, and led them off at a gallop towards the Gare de l'Est where, thanks to four or five police and a score of patriotic citizens, I corralled them in the square. While Diana was licking my hands and one of the policemen was taking my name, I automatically counted my cows. A cold sweat ran down between my shoulder-blades: there were only eleven! Diana had lost one. I looked on every side of the square: no cattle in sight. The notion of scouring the neighborhood, asking everybody I met, 'You haven't seen a cow go by, have you?' seemed impracticable; there was hardly time to put a notice in the papers; and the number of days in the lock-up it would take to equal the cost of one cow was probably so terrible that I didn't dare think of it.

"I sent all the brats in the neighborhood out searching, with a promise of a reward of twenty francs to anyone who would bring back the fugitive.

" 'I'll wait for you here,' I told them.

"Little by little the crowd drifted away. Diana circled the herd at a jog-trot. It was now noon and my cattle bellowed for their lunch. But I expected to see some youngster appear out of a side street at any moment; I should be out twenty francs but, keeping Diana well tied, I still hoped eventually to reach the slaughter-houses in good order.

"A policeman came up to me:

" 'You can't stay here.'

" 'I have lost a cow; I have to wait for it.'

" 'Go wait somewhere else.'

" 'But they are going to bring it back here!'

"The policeman meditated, weighed the pros and cons, and delivered his verdict:

" 'That may be, but you'll have to wait somewhere else.'

"At that moment I felt a desperate temptation to abandon Diana, the cows, and my honor there, and make my way as best I could to Switzerland. But an ominous lowing, and a howl from Diana, which broke out at my back, interrupted my plans. A bus had driven its headlights into the rump of one of my cows and Diana, who of course had been there, had one paw partly crushed. It seems that a new pair of headlights costs at

least eighty francs. I counted out the amount and, surrendering to fate, picked up Diana in my arms and left the field of battle.

" 'You'll find your cow at the pound,' the policeman assured me consolingly.

"At the pound or in heaven, I no longer cared. I climbed the interminable rue La Fayette at a funeral pace, Diana making little unhappy moans in my ear and weighing an extra pound with each step. And at the end of the rue La Fayette, what do you suppose I saw? My cow ambling placidly—its hands in its pockets, as they say at the races—up the rue d'Allemagne!"

Mayeu hesitated.

"At any rate, if it wasn't mine, it had no business walking the streets . . .

"Well, I finally delivered my twelve cows, all alive, to the superintendent at the slaughter-house. It had cost me a police report, eighty francs, and Diana's paw, but there they were, a round dozen like the strokes of midnight. But, my Lord, you should have seen the complaint that arrived at Longchamps the next day! Something like this: 'Although we are unable to determine by what means driver Mayeu reduced the live-stock under his care to the condition described below, we have the honor to report that these cattle were delivered to us

in a state of exhaustion, nervous agitation, and over-excitement, which renders them unfit at present to be slaughtered for the market.' There were two pages in the same style. I was all but accused of having deliberately rendered my poor cows tubercular."

Mayeu sighed and concluded:

"I got a week in the cooler, and then they sent me here. But at that price, I'd gladly have done twice what I did."

I understood then why the unlucky Mayeu clung to the empty bottles of our infirmary with such desperate energy; and I believe that he succeeded in staying there.

As for myself, whose destiny it was to grope my way, since my eyes were of little help, towards a better balance between the aspirations of my soul and the inadequacy of my means, I soon began to dream of a loftier job. A softer job would perhaps be more accurate. I became a metallurgist.

Chapter 9

UNDER my general title of casual in the S. O. S., I had followed so many specialized trades since the outbreak of the war that I should not have been surprised at any moment to have found myself promoted to the rank of telegraphist, or deep-sea diver, or any other occupation involving a uniform. But I had not expected that in the very midst of the war I should be authorized to take up a profession that allowed me to wear civilian clothes.

Like many other stories laid in Paris, this one began in the subway. At the rue Marbeuf, I noticed a man in a dark suit and felt hat board the train, and realized that he looked familiar, although it seemed to me that I had never seen him except in kepi and army blouse. An inrush of passengers separated us, but I made a few tentative gestures and smiled furtively in his direction, so that if I were mistaken, I should merely be set down, at the worst, as someone very nervous or slightly epileptic. But

his glance answered mine, and we elbowed our way towards each other.

"Helio! If it isn't Dufour!" I exclaimed.

"In person."

I voiced my surpise at his appearance:

"So you are in civilian clothes now?"

"Yes . . ."

"Discharged?"

"No."

"On furlough?"

"No."

"Well . . . ?" I lowered my voice: "Are you in the secret service?"

"Far from it. I am a metallurgist, that's all."

He smiled gently:

"Yes, a metallurgist, my friend."

At the Place de l'Étoile, we got off together. On the platform, he drew out an impressive cigar-case, striped like a zebra with platinum and studded with precious stones.

"Have a Carvajal? They're first-class. I just bought three boxes of them."

I lifted one of the massive, pale cigars from the case.

"A light?"

He courteously offered me his lighter, exquisitely fashioned from a nugget of gold, and while I puffed on my Carvajal, he repeated again:

"Just a metallurgist, old man . . . just a metallurgist."

There was no mistake about it, it was Dufour. A few months before, we had been orderlies together in the grimy waiting-room at the section barracks; and evening after evening, with that spontaneous intimacy that springs from common idleness, he had told me how the war had injured his little business in men's shirts and socks, and ruined his prospects. In those less prosperous days, the unlucky Dufour had been humbly assiduous to the mess-call, and had smoked my cigarettes more willingly than his own.

"What has become of the haberdashery business?" I asked.

He exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"No more shirts and socks for me. There's nothing in it."

We had paused before the wrought-iron doorway of a new apartment house.

"This is where I live. I'd be glad to have you stop in if you care to. I'll introduce you to my little friend."

And he added complacently:

"She is in the theatre. I had two thousand posters printed for her début. You may have heard of her."

He mentioned a young actress of doubtful talent but undeniable charms, whose name might be discovered among the small print on the programs.

A maid, who gave the impression of having cut a dozen aprons from a single handkerchief, opened the door.

"Madame is not at home, sir. She left word that Monsieur was to join her at the theatre."

Dufour bore this disappointment with a fortitude that suggested long habit.

"Very well, we shall dine without her."

And we dined. Although there was no reason for haste, Dufour gobbled his dinner. Finally, having despatched his dessert, he swung his chair about, crossed his legs, catching the glitter of the lights on his patent-leather shoes, and, without waiting for me to question him, began his story:

"I suppose you are wondering how I became a metallurgist? Simplest thing in the world. . . . One day the commandant had a requisition to go to the Renault factories, and fate—or luck, if you prefer—ordained that I was sent to deliver it. At the factory, I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I turned around and recognized a

travelling salesman who used to visit me with a line of men's socks.

" 'What are you doing here?' I asked him.

" 'You can see for yourself. I am a metallurgist.'

"He had been chosen with twenty others, alphabetically, and transferred to work in the factories. But he had pulled wires and had himself appointed superintendent.

" 'Talk about a good job!' he told me. 'Twenty francs a day and civilian clothes—you might as well say nothing to do. If you want to try it, I can get you in here. How would you like to be a foreman, eh? A foreman?'

" 'Fine!' I said, and that was the last I thought of it.

"Ten days later the sergeant stopped me in the courtyard.

" 'Dufour, I've got a gin-and-bitters for you.'

"That was his way of announcing good news. In the orderly room, he handed me a transfer.

" 'Private Dufour will report to the Renault factories as foreman.'

"My salesman had kept his word. With the paper in my pocket, I reported the next morning at the executive offices of the factories, at Billancourt. The office manager examined my transfer.

" 'Foreman of what?'

"I shrugged my shoulders as a sign of ignorance, and he shrugged his as a sign of resignation. On looking up his files, it appeared that I had been asked for by my friend, who had been fired the day before.

" 'We don't need any foremen now, but since you are free, you might as well stay that way,' the manager said generously. 'You can come and draw your pay every two weeks, and if a vacancy arises for a foreman, why, we'll see. . . .'

"So there I was, released from duty and free to come and go as I pleased. I began to feel that this business might mean a fortune for me. But unfortunately, I didn't know a thing about metallurgy."

Dufour puffed in silence for a moment on his cigar. Then:

"What would you have done if you had been in my place?"

I groped in my mind for some honorable answer, which he did not give me time to find.

"I'll tell you what I did: I bought all the junk I could lay my hands on in the way of broken-down machinery and piled it up in my shop. There was a skeleton of a sewing-machine, a mechanical churn, a paper-cutter, and a nailing machine. Then I photographed them all together in a hazy light, and I'm damned if they didn't

look for all the world like a real workshop. After that I made the rounds of all the big factories. I showed my photographs and announced that I had an up-to-date equipment for bolting and countersinking. In a week I had taken a hundred thousand francs' worth of orders, with all metals furnished in advance. I at once ran a notice in the trade papers, and in the fashionable periodicals that had a circulation among the rich: 'Manufacturer swamped with orders would welcome associate with capital for purposes of expansion. . . ." I landed on an amiable young man, rotten with cash, who was being hounded by his fiancée's family into finding a job. At the end of three months, I had paid back what he put in, and today I am the sole owner of two factories."

He tapped his vest pocket:

"And every evening there are two long reports laid away in there."

Having finished our coffee, we rose from the table. Dufour stepped into a fur coat, which he tried in vain to fill out, and which cascaded over his heels like a court robe. He lighted a fresh cigar from the one he was throwing away and offered me the case. I hesitated.

"You haven't any cigarettes, have you?"

He filled the room with a majestic puff of smoke.

"No. There's not enough to a cigarette."

Then, with a sharp look at me:

"Come to think of it, suppose I took you along with me?"

"With pleasure. But I don't know the play."

"No, no, not to the theatre, that's understood. I mean, in my factory. Ah, ha! . . . that's an idea. . . . What do you say to that?"

I was about to reply that I was not a metallurgist; but this seemed hardly a proper objection to make to a former haberdasher, so I contented myself with a vague gesture that said nothing, not even no. But he was delighted with his own idea.

"I thought that would appeal to you! If it hadn't, you would have been the only friend I have who had refused! You just let me take care of it, old man, you don't need to bother about a thing."

With a few strokes of his gold fountain pen, he made a note of my name, christian name, and serial number—everything, in fact, that, from a military point of view, constituted me.

"There! All you need do is wait."

This was during the winter of 1916. The cry of "Cannons! Munitions!" had been answered by a rush for orders—and profits—in a fever that recalled the gold rush to Alaska in the '90s. A scabby plot of ground at Leval-

lois was sold ten times in one day without being paid for once, and houses in the suburbs were snapped up to be converted into factories. As for government orders and options on supplies, there was hardly a barber or an usher in the theatres who did not have a few to offer to his customers. Merely because my dreams of glory had come to nothing, was I to be forbidden to form other dreams, and compel destiny to recompense me for my disappointments? Did not Dufour's contented and mediocre face, in the shadows of the vestibule, proclaim that it was a simple matter to grow rich?

After the performance, we made our way behind the scenes to the dressing-rooms, where Dufour's protégée patted his cheeks with nervous fingers.

"Let me introduce a coming Rockefeller to you, my dear," roared Dufour.

The new star smiled deferentially at me from a face that was smeared with vaseline and blotched with paint.

"He's a friend of mine. I am taking him into my business."

At this, the actress's smile grew vague, and her glance deserted me to rest on her Mæcenas.

"I hope you've got the car."

"Not yet. Galabert wants to fix the fan. We'll take a taxi."

We walked up the Champs-Élysées together. At the Rond-Point, Dufour hailed a cab and, while his companion was getting in, he tapped me on the shoulder.

"All you need do is wait. Don't bother about anything. . . . Drop by at the plant occasionally for news. I'll be glad to see you."

I was left alone. The moon shone like Dufour's golden lighter, the stars glittered like Dufour's rings, the dead leaves crackled like Dufour's new shoes. . . . Ah, yes, I too would become a metallurgist!

On returning home, I searched my library for the dusty books I had used in school, and spent the rest of the night in reviving the worst hours of my youth over a textbook in elementary chemistry.

As Dufour had suggested, I stopped in at his factory. He received me graciously and took me on a tour of inspection: not an oil can was overlooked.

"Your application has been sent in, old man. All you need do now is wait. . . . Stop in again sometime for news."

From then on my manual of chemistry and I were inseparable. I acquired an intimate knowledge of the fickle ways of oxygen and the gregarious nature of hydrogen, and I stowed away in my memory more methods of making steel than there are of cooking eggs.

After a few days, I returned to see Dufour. No doubt he was rushed that morning, or preoccupied with his affairs, for his handshake was limp and he received me standing behind his desk.

"I am taking care of you . . . don't worry. . . ."

But I was anxious to show him that I was worthy of his protection.

"I think I can be useful to you. I have been brushing up on my chemistry."

He nodded indulgently.

"Pooh! Chemistry, you know . . ."

As if that austere science had been nothing but a jumble of gossip and nonsense, undeserving of the attention of a serious man.

When I entered the infirmary that evening, Mayeu greeted me with a gloomy air.

"Hard luck, old man . . . you are leaving."

He waved a folded sheet of paper in his fingers, much as though it were a handkerchief he was agitating in farewell. So I had met Dufour too late! In a faint voice I asked:

"Romorantin? . . . Bayonne? . . . Forcalquier? . . ."

"Worse yet."

Worse than Forcalquier? What new infamy had heaven invented for me?

The paper trembled in Mayeu's hand.

"They have made you a metallurgist!"

And, torn with infernal laughter like that of Orestes, he burst out:

"I suppose they will end up by having me clean out sewers!"

We parted without my having the courage to tell him that the victim he pitied had invited his own misfortune; if this book should inform him of the fact, it will at least not be without invoking his compassion and recalling to his rich mind those lines of a wise poet:

> Tremble, my lord; in your blindness beware
> Lest God, in his hatred, heed your prayer.

On reaching home, my first thought was to throw aside the army blouse and breeches that had marked my servitude, and unearth the civilian clothes authorized by my latest transfer. But, alas, for three years I had given hardly a thought to my clothes. At the first wardrobe I opened, I had the impression that I was disturbing a beehive in the midst of its activities. A merciless warfare had been engaged in the darkness between the moths and the naphtha. I could find no fault with the naphtha, which had poisoned the contents of the whole wardrobe

forever; but the moths had not missed a mouthful, and the first coat I took down crumbled in my hands like a mummy drawn from its case. Only a pair of checked trousers and a black frock-coat, which were apparently less edible, had held their own. I speculated as to whether a black frock-coat and checked trousers were the conventional costume for a novice in metallurgy; but the recollection that I should soon be rich enough to acquire the proper clothes overcame any hesitation. I shook these two precious garments in the air, sprinkled them with a little perfume to counteract the fumes of naphtha, and hastened to Levallois. Dufour was at his desk, and I greeted him effusively. But his joy seemed less intense than my gratitude; seated sideways in his chair, he avoided meeting my eyes. He was worried, perhaps, over some problem in his business; but henceforth he would have me to lean on.

"I shan't tell you how grateful I am, old man, but you can count on me. We are going to do great things together."

As if overwhelmed by this generous offer, Dufour redoubled his efforts to balance a pen-holder on the back of a ledger.

"You realize," I persisted, "that I am not coming here without certain ideas about . . ."

With the greatest care, Dufour was now adding sets of antennæ and claws to an ink-spot, transforming it into a cluster of bugs. In a muted voice, his nose over his blotter, he began an explanation:

"I am awfully glad, old man . . . You see, your application went through fast. I might even say, a bit too fast. . . . Because, well . . . I wasn't expecting you so soon . . . and for the moment, just for the moment, you understand . . . I don't see much, in fact I don't see anything . . . that you could . . . well, that would be worthy of . . . you understand?"

Good old Dufour! I reassured him:

"Of course I understand! If it's just a matter of a few days . . ."

His face cleared and he succeeded in meeting my gaze while he outlined the rest of his thought:

"But I want to see you make a success, and so it occurred to me that it would be best for you to do something right away to help familiarize yourself. . . . Now, there's a man at Boulogne, with a small plant, who does some work for me . . . and it occurred to me that, if you didn't mind . . . I might turn you over to him for . . . uh . . . for training."

I accepted this suggestion with enthusiasm.

"Good. I'll telephone him at once," continued Dufour.

"Wait a minute, and I'll tell you what he says."

He had once more grown friendly and cordial.

"The main thing is to get a start, you understand. . . . Hello, operator . . . Boulogne 3–6 . . . 3–6, that's right. . . . Hello! That you, Galabert? . . . How are you? No, it's not about the automobile. . . . Listen, I have a young man here who is just starting out in metallurgy . . . I can't use him just at present; would you like him? . . . No openings? Think hard. . . . That's better . . . to do errands? . . . He'll be very glad . . . No, no, free. . . . You will be doing him a favor. . . . Yes, I'll send him over. . . . So long, Galabert."

Dufour hung up the receiver and turned about with an air of satisfied benevolence, as though he had just secured my appointment, after a long struggle, as administrator of the Bank of France.

"There, you see, it's as easy as that."

Somewhat baffled, I sought to clear up the situation in my own mind.

"Wait a minute, old man. Did I understand that you are sending me to a factory in Boulogne as an errand boy at nothing a week?"

Dufour's head jerked upward in amazement at my ingratitude.

"And how do you suppose Rockefeller began? Just

like yourself! Not a bit better! Why, in a year from now, you'll be holding me in the palm of your hand. That's the sort of start I am giving you."

It was true that such strokes of good luck, such meteoric fortunes did occur. . . . And, some day in the future, when Dufour came crawling to my desk to beseech me not to crush his insignificant factories, I would say to him, "Do you remember the errand boy at Boulogne?" A man like myself had no time to lose. I rose from my chair.

"What is the address of the factory?"

"I knew you would understand," said Dufour simply. And he dictated to me: "Galabert Factories, 195 rue Thiers, Boulogne."

"You mustn't be surprised when you see Galabert," he added. "He is a former workman who has fought his way up in the world. A hard worker, and a man who says what he thinks. You'll have to jump right in, tackle him frankly, and . . ."

He ran his eye over my costume.

"I don't know about wearing a frock-coat at Boulogne on week days . . ."

I interrupted dryly:

"That may be, but I haven't anything else to wear. . . ."

At this he leaped from his chair and all but took me into his arms.

"Just as I said! Another Rockefeller! Why, you put Rockefeller's beginnings in the shade! Now all you have to do is keep going . . . straight ahead!"

He politely guided my first steps straight ahead towards the door of his office, where he gripped my hand in both of his.

"I am glad for your sake, old man, awfully glad."

And with the exquisite generosity of born benefactors, he added urgently:

"Don't thank me, don't thank me yet."

From Levallois to Boulogne, however one goes, is at least an hour's trip. I spent this time in revising my plans to accord with my new destiny. First I must see this Galabert. He was no doubt a silent worker, with a heart of gold, and a simple, attentive mind, which I could inspire with the vision of great achievements. He would soon recognize in me what he himself lacked: the imagination that fertilizes effort; and on his part, he would teach me perseverance. When he had realized, after talking with me, that I was not built to be an errand boy, I would say to him: "And now, Monsier Galabert, let's get to work." And we would work.

I tramped along the rue Thiers, in the middle of the

street, between huge, roaring factories, glass-walled shops, and vast courtyards guarded with iron gates. But the farther I advanced towards my destination, the more the factories and shops diminished in height, and the courtyards shrank in area. Having dwindled in size, they next dwindled in number, and I was soon making my way along a street with nothing to distinguish it but the squalor of its buildings and the odors of its gutter. Number 195 was a six-storied tenement, where the only active industry, judging from the bedecked windows, was the family wash. Apparently Dufour had given me the address where Galabert lived. I plunged into the obscure entryway and groped towards the janitor's box.

"Monsieur Galabert?" I called.

An invisible voice echoed:

"Monsieur Galabert?"

And a moment later the same voice, teetering above a pair of long slippers like skiis, mumbled between empty gums:

"He's the old man opening a crate out there in the shed."

Chapter 10

GALABERT was at least sixty, with the tempestuous features of the great popular tribunes of '48. His complexion, overlaid with grease and scraps of filings, gave him a strange resemblance to those "bronze men" that used to stand on the café terraces, representing the conquered gladiator, the Malakoff zouave, and other standard tableaux.

He gazed at me intently.

"So you are my new errand boy?"

With the smile of a cardinal taken for a choir boy, I agreed to this statement, which I was sure must amuse him as much as it amused me; it might even intimidate him a little. But, entering good-humoredly into the joke, he played his part without faltering: he nodded his head and asked,

"Are you familiar with iron?"

I was aware that a metal of that name existed.

"I am familiar with iron, Monsieur Galabert," I told him. And an unlucky inspiration led me to add: "You

will find an intelligent collaborator in me, and——"

He did not let me finish. The word "intelligent" seemed to have produced a striking effect on him.

"Intelligent? . . . Well, it's a good thing to be intelligent." He sighed. "The man whose place you are taking was not intelligent . . ."

"Ah?"

"No . . . He dropped a two-hundred-pound piece of iron on his foot. . . . He is in the hospital now. . . . If a man can't roll a couple of hundred pounds of casting for ten yards without mashing his feet, I call him a fool. . . ." He offered me his hammer: "Since you are intelligent, knock this crate open for me, my lad . . . I'll make out a list of your errands."

While Galabert, leaning nonchalantly over his workbench, drew up a list that I was only too soon to become familiar with, my intelligence resigned itself to struggling with the far subtler intelligence of a crate that had no desire to be opened; a crate that remained as impassive under my persuasion as an oyster at the barking of a fox terrier. At the first blow, the oily hammer slipped from my fingers, slid like a cake of soap through the slight breach I had opened, and took refuge in the bottom of the crate. With the second blow, I drove such a handsome splinter into my hand that, realizing I could

hardly hope to drive a larger one in, I decided to limit my efforts there. Besides, Galabert had already returned to my side.

"There is not much for you today," he said apologetically. "You can stop at 122 avenue de la République, where they will give you thirty pounds of bolts, and then hop over to 27 boulevard Maillot and ask for Monsieur Galabert's two breech-blocks. They will give them to you."

My anxiety was not from fear that they would refuse. In a casual tone, I asked:

"How much are a couple of breech-blocks likely to weigh?"

"Oh, about . . ."

He hesitated and, apparently balking at arithmetical calculations, glanced towards a steel cylinder the height of a tabouret in the rear of the shed.

"About like that . . ."

Whereupon he added dispassionately:

"The important point is not to drop them. . . . Those things sink into the asphalt like nothing at all, and afterwards it wouldn't be you who would get into trouble." He clapped me on the shoulder: "But with an intelligent young man like you, I shan't worry. You will carry that like a bunch of flowers."

I thought it best to leave no false impression in his mind:

"And being an intelligent young man, I shall get something to carry them in."

M. Galabert's bronze features turned to stone. He gazed at me carefully, thoughtfully, gravely.

"Something to carry them in . . ."

The idea interested him, and he completed it:

". . . a push-cart?"

I saw that this matter must be settled at once, for M. Galabert was already leading me affectionately towards one corner of the yard where an ancient cart lifted its two emaciated arms towards the sky like a Jansenist crucifix. This was no way for a soldier, even of the S. O. S., to be shunted into the artillery. I protested gently:

"I was thinking of a taxi."

"A taxi?" He repeated the word in a flat tone, with the disconcerted eyes of a child that has been struck for the first time and is more bewildered than hurt. "A taxi . . . An intelligent young man like you? . . ."

Did he expect me to charter a hearse, or turn an ambulance from the path of its duty, or distract a Black Maria from its itinerary?

He was turning this novel proposal over in his mind.

"Of course I can't prevent you from taking a taxi. . . . At least, I don't know how I could."

There was a long silence. Then he sighed:

"But it will cost you a lot. . . ."

And, shaking one finger in the air, he admonished me slyly:

"Well, take your taxi if you want. . . . It is hardly the thing for an errand boy. But I'll shut my eyes to it, my lad. I'll shut my eyes."

That first day cost me only sixty-seven francs; but on the second, a raid on Perreux, with a slight detour to a factory at Villejuif to bring back two countersinks which were needed in a hurry, ran up a bill of a hundred francs. Galabert shut his eyes even more tightly than on the first day. Afterwards, he glanced at his watch and nudged me in the ribs.

"You know how to do things, all right. . . ." And clacking his tongue: "You can take care of yourself in this world! You'll go far, my boy!"

His prophecy was soon to be borne out: the next morning, without a flicker of an eyelash, he sent me to Joinville-le-Pont by way of Saint-Ouen to pick up a hundred yards of copper wire and three emery-wheels. To this day I am still puzzled as to the exact rôle of M. Galabert's "factory" in the salvation of the Fatherland.

Although in a single fortnight I brought in enough lead, iron, steel, tin, connecting-rods, breech-blocks, wiring, bolts, sheet-iron, dynamos, and rivets, to build a torpedo-chaser, I never saw anything emerge from our shed except a sewing-machine, which belonged to the janitor's wife and had been reconditioned, and a bicycle belonging to a milkman in the neighborhood, which had had the chain tightened.

Yet never did my intelligence experience such a flowering. Galabert's enthusiasm in testing it, and acknowledging its worth, was inexhaustible. Eventually I learned to prophesy where he was going to send me, the weight of the metals I should bring back, and what it would cost me, by the degree of my intelligence to which he appealed. "An intelligent young man like you . . ." meant that not more than forty pounds awaited me about two miles and a half away. "A very intelligent young man like you . . ." indicated between sixty and eighty pounds some four miles away. And if he rested one hand on my shoulder, bestowed a long preliminary glance on me, and began confidentially: "Today, my lad, you will need all your intelligence . . ." I knew that there were at least a couple of hundred pounds to be brought back from somewhere in the Seine-et-Oise at the trifling cost of a hundred and twenty francs.

It was at this time that I fell in love with Doris.

Doris! a gentle, blonde, frail child to whom I was paying court half secretly, half openly, being not yet quite certain in my own mind whether I wished her to fall into my snares or to yield to my devotion. Since I had exchanged my army blouse for a civilian jacket, her parents regarded me with a little more confidence: in my odor of naphtha they read a bourgeois prudence. One day the luminous idea occurred to me that certain of my expeditions into the suburbs might be transformed into enchanting jaunts if I could persuade Doris to go with me; not to the factory regions of Saint-Ouen or Aubervilliers, but, say, up the valley to Ville-d'Avray or through the Bois de Vincennes to Nogent. April was trying out its first greens, and Doris her first light dresses. The taxis had lowered their windows, but not their tops. Everything, in short, was propitious. My heart pounding, I called Doris one morning on the telephone:

"Put on your prettiest dress, Doris. I am coming to get you and we are going to Meudon, for mushrooms."

"Mushrooms at Meudon, what fun!" I heard an adorable little cry of delight at the other end of the wire. "Come in half an hour—give me just time to change my dress!"

The darling! There would be time enough in the cab to explain to her that when a metallurgist speaks of a "mushroom," he is referring to a chunk of steel in the breech-block of a cannon, placed there for purposes of obturation, and that the fruits of our picking would weigh some hundred pounds, which must be squeezed into the taxi with us. But that could be easily managed if her knees were pressed snugly against mine.

Alas, that we cannot foresee even a few hours of what the future holds for us! Doris was waiting for me at her door, all in pale blue from parasol to slippers, and had I struck her in the face then, had I rolled her in the gutter, or stolen her money and her rouge from her handbag, I might still have had more chance of forgiveness than I was to have at the end of that terrible day.

She was most gracious in agreeing that I had skilfully combined business with pleasure. Under the green vault of trees in the forest at Saint-Cloud, she learned without protest that the enormous bundle we were to bring back would compel us to sit close together; for similar experiences in the past had warned me that the bundle would undoubtedly be large. The weather was clear, the air soft, and we arrived at the factory in Meudon with joy in our hearts. I had already explained to Doris, who was quick to understand, that my beginnings in metal-

lurgy were humble, as she could see, but that there was nothing like a great love to stimulate one's ambition. She had thrown herself into my arms, vowing that she was proud to have known me at the outset of my career, and that her only regret was her inability to share my labors and my worries. She added that it was easy to see, merely from the money I could spend on taxis, that fortune was already beginning to smile on me.

But the first flush of this enthusiasm was soon to be dimmed. Certainly Doris had not expected that a hundred pounds of steel would be delivered to me in a dainty wrapping of glazed paper tied with mauve ribbons. But even I grew pale at the sight of the horrible contraption, swathed in burlap and dripping with grease, that was to keep us company. In vain I begged the driver to take it in front with him. He shook his head.

"It ain't so much the grease I mind, but the smell of it makes me sick to my stomach."

He agreed, however, after a slight extra tip of some forty francs, that my slimy cargo might be installed on the floor of the cab, adding:

"We had better stop at a police station on the way back and get an estimate for the grease on the carpet and against the seat."

For the first few hundred yards, the conversation was all that might have been expected. Turning her face to the door, Doris did her best to breathe through her handkerchief. Never were passionate lovers pressed more closely together. To tell the truth, I was slightly stifling Doris. With the first jolts of the cab, my monstrous bundle, which two men had been barely able to lift into place, had revealed an airy lightness. At the slightest jounce, it careened towards me and, failing in its purpose, which was obviously to break my legs, fell back with the clatter that has since been adopted in moving-picture theatres to give the effect of a railway accident. With each jounce I had barely time to fling myself on Doris for safety, though not without crushing her knees somewhat against the door of the cab. For the first few attacks, I pretended that only a sudden impulse of passion had swept me towards her. But when I had exhausted all the ways of mumbling or stammering "I love you," with no other reply than "Can't you keep still?" or "You're hurting me," I gave up the attempt to talk. Conversation is hardly possible with a partner whose only answer to the question, "You don't want me to have my legs broken, do you?" is to avert her eyes and nibble at her handkerchief.

When a wretched situation can become worse, it is sel-

dom that it fails to do so. At Chaville, our bundle—infuriated by a stone culvert—leaped so far off the floor that in falling back it burst open, and a steel shaft shot out through a rent in the burlap like a high-powered shell, shattering the glass in the door as it vanished. I should never have believed that a taxi could stop so abruptly, nor a driver of fifty hop so deftly from his place and open the door before his feet had touched the ground. He had turned slightly pale; Doris also. I broke into an explanation:

"It's nothing serious, just a little bolt. . . . The glass was rather thin. . . . Do you suppose twenty francs would . . . ?"

The chauffeur nodded deliberately.

"Get out . . ."

"But we aren't there yet."

"Get out!"

Merely because a man is six feet two and clenches a pair of fists like coconuts when he speaks to you is no reason for overlooking his rudeness. I met his glance squarely as I answered:

"We shall not stay another second in this cab. Wipe your eyes, Doris, and come with me."

The driver hauled my gaping bundle out after us and

deposited it on the roadside with a maternal care which he explained:

"When a man carries grenades around, he ought to hire a truck. And have an ambulance follow along behind."

He consulted his meter and then examined the interior of the taxi.

"Forty francs on the clock, my bus shot to pieces, and the pane of glass, that'll be two hundred francs."

The hand that he held out rendered any discussion superfluous; but a fact is a fact.

"I have only a hundred and eighty francs," I stammered.

The scoundrel eyed Doris.

"A good sport would ask his dame . . ."

Doris opened her little handbag. Ever since I had known her, she had treasured an old King Jerome goldpiece, which had been in her family for a hundred years. She slipped it into my hand with a faint smile:

"I'll tell papa I lost it."

If ever I grow rich, a black stone shall be reared by the side of that road, where we found ourselves alone, one April evening, Doris and I. And the bundle.

Doris shivered.

"It's getting dark. We ought to start," she murmured.

"We'll start right away, Doris . . ."

I grasped the hundred pounds of steel, took two steps, my head up, and landed on my knees.

"We ought to get back on the main road," moaned Doris. She stretched out her dainty hand at arm's length: "I think it is beginning to rain."

"Of course it is, Doris. That was the only thing left to happen."

I threw myself literally at her feet.

"Leave me here, Doris! Walk straight ahead. You will find the main road, and a street car that will take you to where you can get a taxi. . . . Leave me, and don't come back. . . . I know the goodness of your heart. In six years from now, or perhaps eight, you will be able to think of me without hatred, and without disgust. . . . You may not believe it now, but you will see. . . ."

Doris shook her head and gazed across the vacant lots.

"I don't mind catching pneumonia, but I shouldn't like to be murdered."

She glanced from me to the burlap bag. And with a little sob in her voice:

"Perhaps if we both tried . . . ?"

"No, no, Doris, I couldn't let you! Besides, your dress!"

A heavy spring rain was falling now in sheets. Doris wrung out her dripping curls.

"Oh, my dress . . . now that my hat is ruined . . ."

Towards eight o'clock, on a night reminiscent of the Flood, the passengers on the Sèvres-Vaugirard street car saw a young woman drag herself on board: a human wreck, exuding water and axle-grease, a bedraggled blue rag on her head, and her face smeared with black oil. What appeared to be a nigger, his collar turned up about his neck, shouted after her in a hoarse voice:

"Drink three hot grogs and stay in bed for forty-eight hours!"

It was midnight when I arrived at M. Galabert's. He shook his head when I appeared and, for the first time, his heart swelled with compassion.

"Today, it's my turn to pay!"

And he slipped five francs into my dripping coat.

Under these depressing circumstances, I began to wonder whether I was truly born for a metallurgical career worthy of my interest. If many people look upon ships as a pastime where life is one series of delights, it is no doubt because they see only those ships that have remained afloat; the others, at the bottom of the sea, maintain a dangerous silence concerning their misfortunes. Obviously, Dufour's sumptuous galley, proudly

beating the waves with its gilded oars, had momentarily dazzled my eyes with a mirage of fortune. But if the past fortnight had not restored me to reason, I should have good cause to fear for my common sense in the future. For it was only too evident that where Dufour was a navigator, I should never be more than a luckless canoeist.

The next morning, after a night in which, like M. Seguin's goat, I had struggled until dawn with bitter regrets, I emptied the pockets of my checked trousers and civilian coat, transferred their contents into the pockets of my blue breeches and army blouse, and rendered unto naphtha the things which were naphtha's. And I was encouraged, in this act of renunciation, by a small honest voice proclaiming on the battlements of my conscience that it was better after all, in time of war, to be a casual in the army, even in the S. O. S., than a casualty in metallurgy.

I found Dufour radiating glory.

"Come in, old man, come in!"

His manner had that friendly welcome of those who are eager to tell you something.

"It's all fixed, old man! I am going into aviation."

"Aviation? But that is dangerous, isn't it?"

He studied my face for a moment, to determine

whether I was serious or ironic. Then, crossing his legs and tipping back his chair, he replied, looking me straight in the eyes:

"Very dangerous. I was summoned day before yesterday to the Ministry. 'Monsieur Dufour, we are desperately in need of more airplanes. We should be glad to see this matter taken up by our manufacturers, especially intelligent men like yourself . . .' "

Good old Dufour! He too had found his Galabert. He continued:

"That was all that was said. And yesterday afternoon, I took over a factory at Billancourt, with complete equipment. If the war ends in three months, I shall be ruined. It will be the street and the bread-line for me."

Say what you will, Dufour deserved some at least of his cigars. . . . He concluded:

"But that won't kill me. To be poor is still the best way to become rich. Now, what about yourself? Where are you headed for?"

"You might better ask where I am headed back to."

"That's so! You are in uniform!"

"I am . . . and I am going to stay there."

"How is that? What about metallurgy?"

"I'm through with it."

He lifted both arms:

"You are mad! With my new plant, I could take you in with me."

I relieved my bitterness in voicing it:

"No doubt there will be lots of errands to do."

"That's not what I mean. No more errands! Money to be made—plenty of money! Two per cent commission on all orders taken, how's that?"

The final temptation! I reflected for a moment, and then asked:

"Listen, suppose your mind were perfectly free at this moment, what would you do?"

"Huh?"

"I said: suppose your mind were perfectly free at this moment, what would you do?"

"Why, I don't know . . ." He meditated. "Come to think of it, yes! I saw a notice the other day in *The Metallurgical Review* for a little business in carburetors at Saint-Denis. I should look into that."

I nodded my head:

"Well, old man, yesterday my mind was free. Do you know what I did? I telephoned a little friend of mine and took her for a ride to Meudon."

"Did you have a good time?"

"Marvellous. But do you get my point?"

"It is certainly not much in Rockefeller's line. . . . Well, what would you like to have me do?"

"Get me transferred out of the metallurgist class. I'll go back to the 22nd Section."

He shrugged his shoulders in resignation. If he made any distinction at that moment between an imbecile and myself, it was surely not in my favor. He drew a sheet of letter-head paper towards him, and scribbled my release from bolts, pins, and screws.

"Don't you want to say good-bye to Galabert?"

"If you could telephone him, I should be glad to."

He took down the receiver:

"Hello . . . Boulogne 3-6 . . . Hello! That you, Galabert?"

At a nod from Dufour, I picked up the other phone:

"Good-morning, Galabert."

"Good-morning, Monsieur Dufour . . . Is it those wire baskets? I have them soldered for you."

"No, no . . . It's about the . . . eh . . . the employee I sent you."

"The errand boy? He hasn't come in yet."

"I know. He won't be in. He is going back to the Section."

"Well, good luck . . . It's too bad, though, I could have used him. . . ."

"Ah?"

"Yes . . . I was going to put him on that cart of mine. But I suppose it can't be helped."

Dufour rose and handed me my paper.

"Here you are. If you change your mind, come back and see me."

"No, I mean it . . . don't look for me. I still have too many foolish things to do, to start the same ones over again. Besides, I think I shall leave Paris."

. . . Good old Dufour! Today he keeps a little haberdashery shop at Dijon. . . .

But I had not yet finished with the telephone. Returning to my rooms, I made one more call:

"Hello . . . Ségur 23–15 . . ."

There was a crackle, like bacon frying in a pan; the line was busy. But instead of the usual little purring sound, I caught scraps of sentences:

". . . we can't understand it at all . . . her dress is ruined . . . and she is in a sort of delirium . . . no, very little fever. . . . She is still asleep . . . can't get a word out of her. . . . That's what I think myself. . . . We are going to send her down south . . . just as soon as she can travel. . . ."

Dear Doris! Today she is a sub-prefect's wife. And I am not a sub-prefect . . .

Chapter 11

THERE is a passage in the *Hinayana* which runs, as nearly as I remember, something like this: "There is a nirvana, O brethren, wherein there is neither light, nor space, nor season, nor the presence of any manifested thing, neither this nor that. Therefore, brethren, I call this neither coming, nor going, nor remaining in one spot, neither death, nor birth, nor life. Without forward movement, without halt, this is the absence of suffering. . . ." The holy man who wrote these lines could never have done so had he not been favored by Brahma with a prophetic vision of the French casual in the S. O. S. in 1916: neither light, nor space, nor season, nor death, nor life, neither this nor that; but he traversed the endless circle of his metempsychoses, leaving a few drops of his identity in each of the moulds into which he was poured.

Having regulated my situation at the personnel office, I returned to Latour-Maubourg with the firm decision never again to make any decision myself, but to surren-

der to Chance a formal and complete authority over my activities. If it were possible for me to do so, I should squat tailor-fashion in one corner of the courtyard and, fixing my eyes on the lowest button of my blouse, remain motionless until the birds of the sky came down to build their nests in my outstretched palms, or the corporal of the week put me on K. P.

The nearer I drew to the barracks, the deeper I sank into the torpor of a clam settling back on its mud bank. But since it had been declared, recorded, and signed, by the Omnipotent One, that each time a casual in the French S. O. S. formed a plan, devised a scheme, or resigned himself to some annoyance, the plan should come to nothing, the scheme should fall through, and even the annoyance should fail to beset him, so this very day, when I believed that I was approaching the limits of renunciation, was to prove the first of a career that I am not pretentious enough to consider glorious, but the memory of which is at least not displeasing to me.

In the courtyard of Latour-Maubourg, a majestic sight awaited me. All the troops of the barracks had been assembled, and with lusty bellowing the adjutants were striving to cram them into a vast square, which persisted in bulging on the sides under pressure from the centre.

Stray soldiers, or groups of soldiers, straggling from every doorway, leisurely joined the central maelstrom. From the windows opening on the stairs echoed a cavalcade of hob-nailed boots and the barking of corporals, as if a cross-country hunt, without horns, were in full swing. Eventually the hunters appeared, driving ahead of them a superb catch of a dozen laggards, who were tossed still hot to the waiting adjutants.

A little lieutenant with a ferret's muzzle was bawling:

"Where are the tailors? Where are the tailors?"

"They are here!"

"No, they are not!"

Two sergeants, unleashed by the chief adjutant, rushed back into the barracks.

The adjutant clapped one hand to his brow:

"My God, the latrines! One corporal for the latrines!"

A corporal disappeared, wooden doors slammed in the distance, and he reappeared, dragging a middle-aged soldier who clutched at his suspenders. The capture of this dangerous evader completed the sporting phase of the ceremony. The sergeants returned without the tailors.

At the command: "Right dress!" the entire mass be-

gan to boil and, after a quarter of an hour of stupendous effort, succeeded in assuming the rigidity and definite contours of a pat of butter forgotten on the back of the stove.

After a few more mild and ineffective attempts at modelling the ranks, the command: "Front!" set everyone in motion again. That of: "Rest" was a signal for animated conversation and a growing tumult, through which the roll-call trickled abjectly, marked by the curious fact that although each name fell into silence the first time it was uttered, its repetition was greeted by at least half of those present, who shouted: "Here!" like a single man.

When this scrupulous check had been applied to the last letter, the commandant stepped out in front of his troops and, in a brief martial address, informed the members of the S. O. S. stationed at Latour-Maubourg that they were about to be conducted, in alphabetical groups, to a board of medical officers, who were awaiting them in the infirmary and would give serious consideration to any signs of improvement in their health. There was not one of those present who had not already passed similar examinations three or four times; and although it was true that the hunt was conducted more intensively each time, it was less from anxiety to save their

skins that the delinquents took to the woods than as a measure of precaution to save their flannel underwear.

The first group wavered towards the door of the infirmary with bovine passivity, amidst a loosening of ties and an unbuckling of belts. It emerged a few minutes later with the same passivity, amidst a tying of ties and a buckling of belts. Group by group the whole outfit followed. I was in the last group: of the thirty or so of us, at least five could have been shipped to the hospital had they requested it; as for the rest, there would obviously have been little difference between sending them to the front and inadvertently committing homicide. I certainly do not mean that it would have been impossible, at that period of the war, to find a single recruit for the combatant service among the S. O. S. But those who might have received this flattering promotion, if they had not already volunteered for it, had employed more ingenuity in avoiding it than it took merely to dodge these naïve raids on our ranks.

Our group in its turn ambled into the stale haze of the waiting-room. An orderly from the canteen, taking off his shoes at my side, confided to me:

"They ought to let us know. Just the one day I didn't wash my feet."

I can only suppose that he calculated a day as in Gen-

esis, on the scale of one hour to a year. I advised him charitably:

"Keep your socks on."

"For all the good that would do!" he said simply.

I was one of the first to enter. The board consisted of the usual old-time colonel and three junior medical officers, who spent their time in washing their hands. I stepped up at random before a little bearded doctor with one stripe, who sat at the foot of the table like an unimportant guest, waiting dreamily for some soldier to seek him out. He glanced at my service record and then stared at me with open mouth.

"Why . . . didn't you go to school at Lakanal?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you don't recognize me?"

A nervous little laugh set up a quivering in his war cross, where innumerable stars formed a milky way lined with palms.

"Come! Don't you remember? Bachalet, the third-form master?"

It was Bachalet! Or, as we used to call him, the Old Cow. The memory of the worst rough-houses of my youth will always be associated with that of Bachalet. The classes that he presided over—if he could be said to have presided—could be compared only with a bull-

ring, in which the bull had been replaced by a sheep. With a profound intuition for his sensitive spots, we spent days in preparing outrageous practical jokes, which I cannot recall today without a quiver of mirth and shame. He was unhappy, poor, and kindly, which was more than enough to goad on a band of unscrupulous convicts such as we thirteen-year-old boys in boarding school were. It was his lot to expiate the bitter griefs of youngsters all in a state of more or less inner confusion and subjected to a strict military discipline. There were evenings when, in his slippers, he shuffled down the middle of the long dormitory from one night-lamp to the next, his hands behind his back, and suicide written clearly on his face. And mornings when the negligence of his toilet had seemed to me an act of pure despair.

Yes, it was the same Old Cow that I had stumbled on here, and who was insisting now in a benevolent voice free from any bitterness:

"Think back . . . Surely you must remember Bachalet?"

Under the sleeves of his army blouse, I recognized the cuffs of a pink shirt with green polka-dots, famous in its day—the edges decorated with a fringe of threads trimmed as close as possible. Bachalet's days could not

all have been joyous: an exaggerated love of life does not go with so many palms and stars. I voiced my surprise:

"Why! . . . were you a doctor?"

"No, not until afterwards, when I had to leave Lakanal . . ."

He blushed slightly: together we remembered the day when he had been dismissed for failing to suppress a riot that only a charge of state troopers could have subdued. He added gently:

"Ah, you liked to have a good time, in those days . . ."

Will my reader think me foolish if I confess that the next words of this former martyr of my youth seemed to me sublime:

"I worked hard, because I wanted to become a children's doctor."

My glance rested on his war cross.

"You've done splendidly!"

He blushed again:

"I was lucky . . ." And he changed the subject.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for the examination."

He smiled pleasantly.

"Well, you have been examined. I am glad to have seen you again. Run along . . ."

"But that is just what I don't want to do."

"What do you want?"

"To be sent up."

He stared at me in amazement:

"Up where?"

"To the front."

"But you are in the S. O. S."

"At any rate, to the Army Zone."

He shook his head:

"Is your mind made up?"

"Yes."

He was obviously distressed by my insistence. He rose.

"Only the head of the board can decide that. I will submit the case to him."

"With your recommendation?"

"Rest assured . . ."

The presiding colonel was wrangling with a poor devil, naked as a worm, whom I recognized from his lament:

"But, Colonel, at the Val-de-Grâce they were going to give me a discharge."

"I don't give a damn for the Val-de-Grâce! It could be the Folies-Bergère for all I care; I am not here to give discharges. I am here to get men for the army."

"But I have to have my treatment every night, sir. My wife nurses me . . ."

"You wouldn't care to have me send my mother along, would you? Up to the front you go, my man. When you get there you can report on the sick-list. They'll evacuate you, and you'll come back to the rear. Then I suppose you'll be satisfied."

Bachalet was already pushing me towards him. The colonel grumbled:

"Another faker, I suppose . . ."

"No, sir. This man wants to be sent up to the Army Zone."

The colonel broke out into a furious barking:

"What? This man wants . . . This man wants . . . A man who 'wants' . . . I don't know that word. Obedience, nothing but obedience . . ."

And, glaring at me:

"Attention! . . . You are talking to an officer, aren't you? I'll teach you to want. . . . Do you think it is a favor to be sent to the front? . . . Obey, my friend, obey until it hurts!"

Then, with a frown:

"You'll go to the front, do you hear? . . . And no argument about it. You don't argue with a colonel. That'll do!"

I lifted my right hand timidly to my right temple. He started up from his chair:

"Military salute, palm of the hand at the cap! You haven't any cap, eh? Bareheaded! . . . Right face! Get along with you!"

Bachalet led me away. When we had returned to his seat, he asked sadly:

"Are you satisfied, now that you have got what you want?"

"Yes, thank you. And I am grateful to you."

He brushed my gratitude aside with a slight movement of his hands.

"No, don't thank me until you have tasted the favor I have done you. . . ."

"You think I am afraid?"

"No," he sighed. "No . . . But one never knows what sort of a favor one is doing . . ."

Gazing over my head, he began, in his timid voice, to tell me a story.

"I am at the Val-de-Grâce, had I mentioned it? I have a ward there . . . tubercular patients, poor devils. I have worked in many hospitals in civilian life, and I have seen poverty-stricken patients, but they are never in such straits as a destitute soldier. The man I pitied most was named Chappard. He was convalescing slowly

after a double pleurisy, and was just beginning to go out a bit, in the garden of the hospital. He used to do what odd jobs he could for the other patients, to earn a few sous. . . . One day I received a note from the head doctor: 'Your ward will supply one deserving convalescent. It is for an army work that is organizing an exposition: among other things, there is a simple apparatus that they would like to have demonstrated by a soldier. The man you select must have written permission to leave the hospital, and must report back by six P. M.' Naturally, I chose Chappard, thinking that he would probably find some way of picking up a little extra money. The next day, when I made my rounds, his eyes were slightly feverish, and he registered two or three tenths of a degree more than he should. But the fact that he had been out for the first time would explain that. 'At any rate, do you like doing it?' I asked.—'Yes, sir, I made seven francs.'—'Perhaps you had better rest today?'—'Don't make me do that, sir!'—'Is it tiring work that you have to do there?'—'No, sir, I pull a cord that makes an apparatus work, that's all.'—'Well, you can go back if you want, and good luck.'—The third day, however, he did not go back, for he had died the night before, carried off in two hours by a relapse that had struck him like a thunderbolt. When we undressed

him, we discovered that this poor Chappard, who had not been allowed to take a bath for three months, was as clean as a new penny, rinsed like the week's wash. An investigation threw all the light we needed on that fact: the exposition in question was one of hygienic equipment simplified for use at the front. To arouse the generosity of the spectators, various apparatus were demonstrated—among others, a marvellous cold shower; and Chappard, in a pair of bathing trunks, pulled the cord each time a group of people came near his stand: on an average of seven or eight times an hour. . . ."

Bachalet shook his head.

"I know it was doing him a favor to help him kick the bucket, but still it wasn't the one I wanted to do for him. . . ."

I shook his hand before leaving.

"Taking everything into account, I still thank you. I couldn't stand it any longer."

Bachalet raised his eyebrows.

"Do you want to fight?"

"No."

It was the first time that the question had been put to me, either by myself or by someone else. To reply adequately, I chose my words with care, as though much depended on my answer:

"I don't know whether I am brave or cowardly: I have had to change my mind too often on that subject. I fear I have never been spontaneously brave; I have always needed a few minutes to get myself aroused. And if, at the end of those few minutes, the occasion has passed, I feel spineless. But as I have never cheerfully been a coward, so I have always found that, if circumstances give me time, I manage to come out creditably in the end. One day when I was a child, I saw a gang of boys taking turns in throwing stones at a dying dog. They were all of them older and stronger than myself. The idea of interfering with them terrified me, and I basely let them go on. But when the largest, tallest, and most formidable of them picked up a stone that I could not have lifted, I flung myself on him—which was much more fun for him than torturing a dog that could no longer even whimper.

"Then I also remember one evening during a strike, when my uncle, who was an engineer, was sent to arbitrate with the strikers. He took me with him to a café where they had their headquarters. I was eighteen at the time. The discussion soon grew heated, and one idiot, who was also with my uncle, imagining that he had been threatened, broke a bottle over a miner's neck. In a few minutes the café, where we had barely had time to

barricade ourselves, was besieged by a mob of a thousand howling men. We four were left alone inside, and the proprietor had turned off the gas as he fled. Three of the four were calm, ready to shoot or fight with their fists; and the fourth, myself, so frightened that my teeth were chattering and my neck between my shoulders. I was not just trembling morally, but with actual shivers, almost spasms, like a dog crouching in the snow; it was so obvious that my uncle and his two companions took pity on me and avoided speaking to me or looking at me. Yet I remember that even when I was most abject inwardly, I made it a point to behave exactly as the bravest man might have behaved in my place. One of the other three stepped up to the window, which was shattered at that moment; I was so close beside him that a stone could not have passed between us. The strikers had ripped up a bench on the square and were battering the door with it; the hinges were beginning to spit plaster. 'They'll smash everything,' said my uncle; 'we might as well open. But I'll shoot the first man that touches me.' Although I was shaking with terror, I reached the door ahead of him; it was already beginning to give. No drunkard's hand, feeling for a key-hole, was ever more limp than mine as I groped for the key to that floodgate, hammered by fists, shoulders, beams, and curses.

Finally, my fingers found the key, but they slid over it like water, my knees melted, and I fainted. Otherwise, I should have opened."

"Yes . . ." concluded Bachalet, "you would have opened. You would have said: 'Gentlemen . . .' They would have answered: 'Shut your trap!' and without retreating, but very cautiously, you would have let yourself be beaten up."

"And what will all that get us, in heaven?"

Bachalet shook his head again.

"Have you a little money?"

"A little, yes . . ."

"Then get your clothes on quick. And go out and buy all the glasses you can find. Get a suitcase full of them. Wherever they send you, have one pair on your nose, one in your hand, and two in your pockets. When the last pair is broken, have yourself evacuated. Until then, duck your head whenever you think you hear a train, or little birdies singing: when you think you see a pine cone on the ground, don't pick it up; don't take walks in broad daylight, nor in moonlight; don't stumble over artillery caissons; don't take the M. P.'s for beggars, and you will come out all right. . . ."

And, shaking my hand, he added merrily:

"You'll have to, for if someone in the S. O. S. got

bumped off, the whole division would laugh for three days."

⁂

Order of March 3rd, 1916:

"The mare Scheherazade is transferred to the Military School, and will be maintained by Transport Squadron No. 19, as of this date.

"Private Jean Milon, limited service, is transferred to duty in the Army Zone, and will report to H. Q. of the G. N. A., Section 106, as of this date.

"All soldiers of limited service in the classes 85 to 90, with a speaking knowledge of Bulgarian and experience in operating agricultural tractors, will report to the office of the commandant. Any concealment of qualifications will be punished by two weeks in prison.

"Etc., etc. . . ."

The Army Zone! . . . H. Q. . . . G. N. A. . . . Section 106. . . .

Surely I might stick a flower in my rifle over this . . .

But, alas, I had no rifle: merely a policeman's short sabre. Why not a blind man's staff?

Ah, yes, I also had a little Browning, bought out of my own savings; the sort one gets to come home late at night.

Sancta Simplicitas!

Chapter 12

THE sharp breeze of an April dawn. During the night, at Orry-la-Ville, under a vast hangar polished by the cold, I had learned where I was going: to Vic-sur-Aisne. And also that H. Q. of the G. N. A. meant Headquarters of the Group of Northern Armies.

Orry-la-Ville was a railroad station. But where had I already seen this nocturnal landscape of sprawling empty lots, enclosed by posts and barbed wire, illuminated by milky electric search-lights as if hung from masts; these dark forms sleeping in knots, in clusters, in herds; these vast fields of beaten grass; these interweaving sets of tracks; long dark convoys of windowless cars; and wooden platforms low on the ground . . . ? Now I remembered . . . In Illinois, at the prairie shipping-stations for the Chicago packing-houses.

On leaving Paris, I had felt warlike and magnificent in my new field uniform, my russet knapsack, and my helmet of vivid blue. Here I suggested a toy waiting to be sold, a marionette just out of the shop, or a porcelain

doll before it is baked. My train was drawn up by the platform, already jammed. . . .

It was really a skeleton train, nothing left of the cars but the framework, the wheels, the seats and the steps. Martial elbows had shattered the windows; the leather straps, through which one used to slip an arm for support, had long since been converted into belts around blue breeches; the luggage nets had become provision bags; and the curtains had been metamorphosed into Russian handkerchiefs, ties, and socks.

I strolled past the compartments, like a civilian hunting patiently for a corner opposite a pretty woman. It was not a pretty woman I was looking for, however, but a friendly face, which might give me courage to ask: "Would you mind moving over a little, to make room for me?" But nowhere did I arouse a spark of interest: I was plainly an object of suspicion. Had I stepped in boldly, they would no doubt have crowded together to let me sit down. But I craved more than that: to have revived my spirits would have taken at least a handsome offer of my own coat-of-arms in plaster—a vain botanical allegory, for it happens that my coat-of-arms represents a fiancé's bouquet. But I could hardly deliver a lecture here on my intimate feelings. So I made my way to the rear car of the train and climbed, unseen, to the

brakeman's cabin. There I foresaw that I should shiver, and perhaps faint with cold and suffocation, but I would at least take on an enviable patina of dust, smoke, and grease. . . .

Compiègne! We arrived while day was breaking, pale as water, over a charred, cracked, gaping station, sanded with ground glass. Almost every night the German squadrons were flying down from Noyon for a lively conversation with this initial region of the Army Zone, a peaceful supply district, overlaid with carnage. Beyond Compiègne, the countryside at once became smooth, green, and tranquil again. But that did not matter. When you pass Basle, you still hear French spoken, but you know that you are in Switzerland, and that knowledge is enough to evoke the charm of a strange country.

From my crow's-nest, I kept a sharp lookout on the horizon, my ear-drums stretched like a lobster's eyes. Should I see the war first, or hear it? The gleam of bayonets or the thunder of cannon? But there was neither sight nor sound of fighting. Along the roads, army trucks trailed each other in endless chains, like beetles in mating season.

Finally, a little beyond Attichy, a square of soldiers was drawn up in an open field: a review for the bestowal of decorations, as charming as the distribution

of rustic prizes to an accompaniment of the village band. A half dozen grimy and excited little dogs were scampering among the ranks. I could not understand why the engineer did not slacken speed to enjoy such a delightful scene at leisure. Oh, I knew that these were heroes who were being decorated, and that the citations read: ". . . remained at his post with his machine gun . . ." or: ". . . conducted himself with exemplary courage in spite of his wounds. . . ." But from my perch, the picture seemed so fresh, so gay, so like a canvas by Watteau, that I began to imagine the daintiest inscriptions on the medals: ". . . for having written a charming letter to his mother . . ."—". . . conducted himself always towards his comrades with the most tactful consideration . . ." or: ". . . brought his lieutenant the first violets of the season. . . ."

Vic-sur-Aisne. On my arrival, I had at once the pleasant impression of being in a place where I was already well known; for I passed my time in saluting. And what flattering exchanges there were: my private-second-class salute for a captain's or a colonel's. With a little luck, I might have a general's at the same price. On the Square, I was stopped by an M. P.

"What are you doing here?"

He looked me over distrustfully, weighing my appearance, and seeking perhaps to divine my exact rôle in the secret service of the Central Empires. Then he added:

"Vic-sur-Aisne is no place for enlisted men. . . ."

Certainly he seemed to be right. On every side, I saw only captains, majors, second lieutenants, and colonels, scurrying about the Square like soldiers in the barracks courtyard. At rare intervals, the shadow of an orderly passed, hugging the walls, a lost soul straying among the powers and dominions.

The M. P. consulted my travel order. It was obviously a forgery, concocted in Brussels, or Basle, but what could he do? So far, the appearances were in my favor. Let me get myself shot elsewhere.

"At the end of the Square. The Château. Where you see the sentry box."

The driveway to the Château had been turned into an autodrome, crowded with coupés flying general officers' colors, racing cars with vast initials on the doors, and liaison sedans. The sergeant of the guard welcomed me, I must confess, cordially.

"You're in the nick of time, old man. Pétain just came in, with Foch and Mangin. All they are waiting for now is you."

Unfortunately, he concluded this flattering speech by barking at one of the men in the sentry-box:

"Hey, Toupin! Here's a pen-pusher to go over to the barracks. Show him the way!"

And Toupin extended a friendly invitation:

"Come on, paper-eater, drag your hump!"

I followed him.

In the courtyard were more automobiles, a caviar of automobiles. On the rear seat of a limousine, his chin on his stomach and his cap on his cheek, a poor insignificant little brigadier-general lay sound asleep, his hands lying palms upward towards the roof of the car, his knees bundled in a soldier's overcoat.

"A general taking a snooze . . ." I murmured to Toupin.

But Toupin shrugged his shoulders, as though I had hoped to arouse his wonder by pointing out a pebble, or a bicycle, or an old shoe.

"If I had to look at all the generals around here . . . There aren't enough chairs at H. Q. for them all to sit down at once. . . ."

We were skirting a lawn. Toupin continued, but as if he were addressing his shoes, and barely moving his lips:

"If you get a kick out of seeing the big bugs, take a

look at those steps over at the left. You won't often see anything better than that. Take a look, but keep on walking!"

Three officers were idling on the brown and gray steps.

"The short one on the left is Mangin," whispered Toupin. Mangin was playing with a little ball of moss with his toe, pushing it away from him, pursuing it, and recapturing it. His head automatically followed the movements of the moss. A thick, heavy face, compressed between a solid jaw and a low forehead, a face as massive as a fist and as hard as a fist.

"The other two are Pétain and Foch."

Pétain and Foch had left Mangin to play alone, and were talking quietly together, their hands in their pockets. Pétain, with a bushy moustache, thick ears, and full cheeks; an undistinguished face, set off by a pair of kindly eyes: the sort that used to be known as "father of the regiment." Foch, lean, slightly stooped, nose and ears long, his temples hollow, chewing the gray straw of his moustache, while his alert eyes danced under his brows, silvery as the griffin of Belgium. During the moment it took me to pass, he had glanced at me twenty times in the millionth of a second. His right hand, in the pocket of his short coat, quivered like a rabbit held on

a leash. Any headgear would have seemed heavy on that mercurial face, and still more so the enormous cap that he wore, high in the crown, heavy with felt, and projecting into a long visor, which shaded his features to the chin.

"Well?" asked Toupin nervously, "you are not going to try to get their autographs, are you?"

And he led me away.

"They are waiting for Franchet. Probably about that business with the 217th."

"What was that?"

"It seems they didn't want to go back up into the lines. They locked up their officers and a few more fatheads like them."

"What happened?"

"They were in rest-camp at Vingré. Franchet picketed the neighborhood with biscos and machine guns."

"Biscos?"

"From the Moroccan division. The men in the 217th could talk all they liked to those fellows. They don't know a word of French."

"Anybody bumped off?"

"No, but there will be. Officially. They just starved them out. Besides, they realized soon enough that they were done for."

"Did they surrender?"

"This morning, it seems. First they made them turn over their officers. Then they made them pile up all their duffle on the Square in the village: guns, bayonets, knives, grenades, those that had any, blouses. . . . And afterwards, orders for them all to assemble in the church."

"What do you think they will do to them?"

Toupin's shoulders shrugged in their leather straps.

"Those trucks that have been going by since morning are for them. . . ."

A few steps in silence: then Toupin stopped. Lifting a stubby hand with wide-spread fingers, he pointed across the fresh green of the park to a hideous barracks, smeared with tar and lighted by limp window panes of oiled muslin.

"The clerks are over there. Have you got a cigarette?"

I gave him one. He lighted it, cupping his hands before his face, which took on a golden hue. Then he ambled off towards the latrines, bulging with cartridges, his stomach thrust out, his head tilted back, and his feet shuffling, the same color from head to foot as his tobacco smoke, like a plump little bustard.

On the threshold of the barracks, I stumbled into an

adjutant who grew pale with joy at sight of me, and could barely stammer:

"20th Section? . . . clerk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you handle a typewriter?"

"Yes, sir."

He took me into his arms; he led me inside. . . .

"Here, take this . . . sit down there. . . . Do this first, six copies. . . ."

He pushed me towards a Remington with an air of urging me to the battlements in a moment of crisis.

"Don't stop to talk. You can talk at supper. Type! . . . Type! . . . Double space . . . and carbons. You are forgetting the carbons!"

Foch's joy at seeing the 42nd Division appear on the Fère-Champenoise . . .

"Type, my boy, type! . . . That's the way! . . . Ah, I can feel that you know how, I feel it! We need men here!"

He piled documents, papers, erasers, blotters, pencils, copy-paper, and blank forms, about me.

But he had ceased to watch me: although still listening, he was gazing into space, no doubt behind the German lines, far behind them in a tar-smeared barracks, where a *Feldwebel,* his enemy brother, was sweating

over his *Schreiberei,* perhaps groaning before a deserted Underwood.

A minute later, he leaned over my shoulder.

"The new men come up here with the notions they get at the rear. So I warn you. Here you type. If you have any little needs of nature, you take care of them before you start, or after you finish. . . . During working hours, it'll cost you four days."

There was a chief for you!

It was true he did not have the mighty gullet of a hero. With his fat hips, his thick nose, full lips, and goggling eyes, he would have thrown away his rifle and fled, I am sure, had he been caught in an attack remote from his barracks. But I am equally sure that here he would have held us at our Remingtons, at the point of a revolver, under the worst bombardment. And he would have been the first to let the needs of nature wait.

What houses were still standing at Vic had been transformed into innumerable messes. There was the generals' mess, much in the style of Voisin's restaurant; the staff mess, somewhat like Weber's; the chauffeurs' mess, which suggested Prunier's of sea-food fame, for—having many idle hours—these gentlemen were busy fishing the Aisne dry by various quick and barbarous methods of poaching; the telegraphists' mess, which was

like the lunch room at the Stock Exchange, being full of tumult and false rumors; the orderlies' mess, on the style of Chartier's; the M. P. mess, on the style of the Duval chain; and the non-commissioned officers', which was famous for its southern stews; not to mention ten or a dozen clerks' messes, which enjoyed alternating popularity. The one I had landed in was a quiet little restaurant like Cazenave's, only more shabby, which had no prejudice against rabbits snared at midnight or chickens from unofficial sources.

But all of these messes breathed the same back-stairs atmosphere: the incessant and breathless conversation of underlings about their superiors. Whatever they may have done in civilian life, all of these men had fallen into the habit of answering a bell like so many maids: two rings for the lieutenant in charge of maps, three rings for the captain in charge of correspondence . . . with the result that, at table, we were served with a watery soup of gossip and a hash of quotations from the drawing-room.

Were we slackers? The answer is not so simple. Of the eight of us that sat down together that April noon, Flaquières was later to be blown to pieces by a bomb, Grousseau was to die of typhoid, and Bunnet was to go insane under bombardment. In a few months, I myself

was to be slightly gassed at the Queue-de-Vache, near the foot of the Mont-des-Cats. David, falsely accused of a grave delinquency in line of duty, was to commit suicide with his policeman's butcher-knife. The entire Army Zone, in fact, ran down a gentle slope towards that sinister gutter of the front lines. Étienne, who sat at my left, and Dumas, who sat next to him, were to see fighting in the Ardennes; and Rudeau, the hospital orderly, was to carry his stretcher across a field near Soissons under a rain of bullets.

But for the moment, destiny had turned a smiling face towards us. The others initiated me into my new situation. A step echoed along the garden hedge outside our restaurant. Bunnet tapped me on the shoulder:

"You're a writer; do you know who that is?"

With dainty Chinese steps, a hint of rouge on his lips and his complexion imperceptibly heightened, his fingers tucked in white sleeves, his head down and his eyes lost in abstraction, a navy captain, in dress uniform, was making his way towards the Château: Captain Viaud.

"Why! . . . It's Pierre Loti!"

My companions enjoyed my surprise.

"In person. He is attached to the staff."

"What for?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. He lives alone in a little house by the cemetery, and seldom goes out."

"You can't say he is popular," commented Grousseau. "The officers can't stand the smell of him."

"And the General?"

"Franchet? Oh, he doesn't give a damn. From time to time he calls him down, but he doesn't take him seriously."

"Calls him down? Why?"

"That depends. The last time, it was about the chair. Each of the higher officers here, you know, has an orderly who stands outside the door of his quarters. The orderly has nothing to do but stroll up and down, and lean against the wall when he gets bored. Well, the other day, Loti, who is kind-hearted, took a chair out to his orderly. When Fornas, the commandant, went by and saw this bird sprawling in an arm-chair, he nearly had a fit. . . ."

Two o'clock. We were on the Square in front of the Château, when a squad of M. P.'s burst from the guardhouse, interrupted the traffic, ordered cars to draw to one side, and cleared the street. His curiosity aroused, Étienne whispered to me:

"They don't often do that. Stick around and we'll see . . ."

We stationed ourselves behind an unharnessed supply cart. And what I saw that day I shall never forget.

"Behind the tree, General Franchet . . ." murmured Étienne.

At the edge of the moat that separated the Château from the Square, stood the rusty trunk of a horse-chestnut tree, not yet in leaf. And behind the tree, a man, motionless, his hands behind his back: Franchet, the commanding general of the Group of Northern Armies. His heavy shoulders drooping, his face drawn from sleeplessness. A secretive face: that of a Mangin depressed, deadened, and softened. But the hard eyes looked out with a rough stare. The heavy chin overflowed its jaw-bones; a paunch; short legs, chopped off above and below by the coat and high boots.

He was alone. Not an officer beside him. Behind the trunk of this bare tree he crouched hidden.

At that moment, the road from Fontenoy disgorged what he had been looking for. A truck, followed by a second, and a third, and then more, and more . . . The trucks from Vingré, an armed M. P. beside the driver and another on the step. Inside, men in shirt sleeves, bare-headed or wearing woollen caps; thirty to a truck. It

was the 217th, stripped of its arms and equipment, being shipped to the rear in a cloud of dust. Until the transport reached the Square the men sang in ringing tones, like harvesters returning from the fields. In front of the Château, they yelled, spit, and howled, at both the M. P.'s and the officers; a few shook their fists in the air. As they started down the steep hill beyond the Square, the singing began again, broken by the jouncing of the trucks and mingled with the rattle of stones and iron. . . . Ah God, who shall be their judge?

Behind the chestnut tree, a man was watching, listening, his brows drawn, his lips pressed together, riddled with despairing curses. On his face, neither anger, nor cruelty, nor contempt. Neither kindness nor grief. Nothing. An inert calmness, the face of a man asleep.

When the last truck had passed, and the dust fallen, he turned about abruptly. Slowly he crossed the lawn. At the steps an orderly saluted. Franchet lifted his head slightly and gazed into the orderly's eyes. Then he moved by, and on the empty terrace looked about him, as if searching for more eyes to meet, more eyes that he might force to drop beneath his gaze. . . .

Chapter 13

WHAT! So many pages already!

Writing a book is much like packing a trunk. No matter how many things you may have to cram in, you imagine that there will be room for everything. At first you pile in only the unnecessary things; and it is not until you cannot press the lid down with your knee that all the indispensable items, scattered from one end of the bed to the other, and heaped on the chairs, begin to claim your attention. You can repack your trunk, but you do not rewrite your book.

You do not rewrite it, but sometimes you write another. It cannot be helped if, in spite of myself, I am ending this book where it should begin: with the day when, having been assigned to the 358th Infantry Regiment, I was at last privileged to enter the promised land of mud, lice, truck rides by night, relief of troops in the line, and similar natural indemnities, which inflamed the other branches of the Army with jealousy of the infantry.

What! Shall I never write of that delightful château at Roucy, nor of the shady groves at the Chemin des Dames, nor of those entrancing lagoons at Goedewaerswelde?

Nor of that glorious day when I received my baptism of fire under a hail of bullets on a rifle-range, where I had short-sightedly ventured?

Nor of the farm at Moewecapelle, where fifty privates, eight sergeants, and three officers proposed to an ingenious Flemish maiden, who insisted on receiving a wedding-ring from each of her fiancés in advance, and had laid away—sensibly enough—six pounds of wedding-rings, thus acquired, under the floor of the barn?

Nor of that lovely path at Guyencourt, where for three weeks funerals decked with crowns of yellow pearls and white muslin flowed like a stream?

Nor of that sea wind that gave a naval aroma to the bombardment at Steenworde?

Nor of that tree at Nouvion where a dead horse dangled from the branches?

Indeed I shall write of them, if only for my grocer's wife!

And of that book—or of this one—here are the final pages. . . .

July in Flanders. The rising sun was transforming the Mont-des-Cat into a volcano.

For lack of better accommodations, the divisional headquarters had been crowded into a farm cottage, with walls as thin of those of a Japanese tea-house and known as Queue-de-Vache, since it happened to lie at the confluence of three beaten roads in a broad plain. One had only to dig into the ground and water flowed; at the first spadeful, the earth burbled. Nearby was a village whose name I have forgotten, a Belgian hamlet, where three or four men of the 358th were killed each night for the pleasure of buying tobacco from King Albert's carabineers at two sous less a package.

The artillery had ceased to direct much of its fire against the front lines, where a cat could no longer have recognized its young. French, Belgians, and Germans dipped their bread in wine and contented themselves with hand grenades for regulating trifling nuances in the boundary lines, of which the headquarters staff had long since begged to be left in ignorance. For once, the big shells were seeking out our quarters behind the lines, exchanged with no animosity on either side, but a desire to turn in satisfactory reports of ammunition

used. Nine shells out of ten skidded off into the sand, the fuse barely scratched, and were buried intact, to remain as so many *Vergiss-mein-nicht* for the civilian population when it returned. The tenth, striking the hard pavement, did the work of the other nine, crumbling a deserted inn, scalping a truck, shattering a motorcycle, or tangling the telegraph wires with a sickening racket.

Jadin, Boucques, Berton, and Mivet pounded their Remingtons at my side in the farm stable, where the liquid manure trickled between our feet. A gray mare beside us beat a tattoo with her iron heels when our machines grew too noisy. In our ostrich hearts, we blessed the fate that had set us at paper-work under a roof of crazy planks and tiles as thin as waffles, confident that this impenetrable armor would check the whirling flight of any well launched 155. At each explosion on the road the mare laid back its ears, and a moth-eaten cat, slipping under the door, fled across the barn and flattened itself against the far wall.

So far we had suffered no losses, in spite of a cursed little flag, not more than ten yards from the entrance, whose bunting fluttered at the slightest breeze and must have been visible from the suburbs of Ostend. An airplane hovered over us, high up. And suddenly a mur-

muring of bees dropped straight down upon us in a bewildering, sonorous puff of sound, a chromatic monstrosity, which bored into our entrails, locked our teeth, squeezed our bladders. An accident? Not for the airplane. With a thundering *decrescendo,* it had already reverted to a delightful humming of wasps.

But the barn door was flung open. His swarthy face hidden to the ears, a sergeant roared:

"Gas! Put on your masks, and flat on the ground!"

I seized the leather strap that held my mask case and unbuckled it. . . . Another airplane, two more . . . The poisoned bombs were bursting on the grass with soft thuds, like earthenware jars. I was struggling now with both hands to open the case. . . . Presently my head began to swim with horror. For five minutes I had been staggering around a greenish pool with an empty case in one hand, the other still clutching order No. 2493 from G. H. Q., urging company commanders to be economical in the use of logs for firewood.

The airplanes had gone. . . . A hundred yards away, Boucques and Mivet came down out of an apple tree they had climbed. . . . Along the ground floated long streamers of smoke. My throat felt a little rough . . . at least, so it seemed. I did not dare breathe except with my palms pressed close against my mouth. But that did no

good . . . my throat was a little rough, as after too many cigarettes. . . . We returned to the barn, walking backwards, to keep our backs to the wind: a sea breeze which rolled up the yellow streamers and carried them away. But not before an officer had scurried off—and it was time he did so—with the little flag, which had gone psst! to the Fokkers, under his arm. It was high time he did so, when my throat was beginning to feel rough.

"Open your mouth!"

A burly lieutenant from the information bureau—approximately competent for this duty—examined my tonsils. Full of natural benevolence, Pacault, our adjutant, guided his diagnosis:

"When they have been gassed like that, they bump themselves off sometimes. . . ."

"The medical officer will have to see him first, Pacault."

But such chatter could no longer alarm me. My throat was rough now, and a few days hence, at dawn, a hospital orderly with dirty finger-nails would be closing my eyes. Anything that might happen from now on was already posthumous. To be sure, I was somewhat disgruntled: what advantage was there in wiping out a private in the S. O. S.? That would not count on the score . . . Like those unlucky fish that are left to die

in the net, before the fisherman has noticed that they are not edible. . . .

"Go see the medical officer," concluded the burly lieutenant, withdrawing his eyes from my mouth.

The first aid station was at Houndswaële, two miles by the road. But I could not afford to be killed every five minutes; I took to the fields, at the cost of an extra full mile. The gray sky hung so low that as I moved forward I felt like a little dog crawling under a quilt. I could no longer breathe except in great gulps, with the pleasant impression that I was swallowing an endless string of croquet balls. In my mind, I toyed with a single sentence, "Myrto, the maid of Tarentum, lived . . ."—but how I savored it, crooned it, modulated it. . . .

Destruction had fallen on Houndswaële, and every three minutes the 77's were grinding it finer. . . . I wandered helplessly about the abandoned first-aid station. Unexpectedly a voice hailed me:

"Hey, you!"

As far as I could see in any direction, no one in sight. Yet the call was repeated:

"Over here, God damn it!"

The voice came unmistakably from the garden, yet

there was not a soul there. . . . But suddenly, as if by some fakir's magic, a hand blossomed out of the ground, along a driveway, followed by a sleeve with two stripes. The medical officer was seated in a trench lined with boards, smoking his pipe and taking the air chiefly through his feet while he waited for patients. At each explosion, I ducked my head and he lifted his nose.

"I think I am gassed, sir."

"Lie down."

"Where, sir?"

"On your belly, so I can look."

I stretched myself out on the grass, my head over the trench, in the bottom of which a little fox terrier, squatting in the water, was nibbling its paws.

"Would it make you very unhappy if I evacuated you?"

"I suppose I am lost, sir?"

A medical officer is not hampered by tact. I awaited the terrible reply. It came promptly:

"Lost? Certainly. But you needn't worry. When the time comes to look for blockheads, you will be the first one they'll find."

He scribbled something on his lap and handed me a large-sized trunk label.

"Stick that in your pocket. The ambulance is at the end of the village if it is anywhere. You will excuse me if I don't escort you."

Noon . . . An interminable street through the centre of Houndswaële . . . Far away, at the end of the street, the little gray ambulance, marked with the red cross. Ah, if I could only get that far with a whole skin! My precious skin, almost out of danger now!

A roof crumbled and fell at my heels. No doubt the wall beside me would collapse as I passed. A malignant landscape, moved by invisible strings . . . If I could only hold the two sides of this street apart with the flat of my hands for another minute! Let nothing come to kill, crush, or rend; let there be a happy ending for this poor devil in the S. O. S., as for Charlie Chaplin, when, at the end of his misadventures, he dwindles into the distance, like myself, with wavering steps, his shoulders hunched, his head down, and his little cane twirling.

Just as, a few minutes later, I was twirling the little brass curtain-rod, with its burnt smell, to keep myself in countenance before the ambulance driver—a real ambulance driver for real soldiers. . . .

THE END